Teaching Philosophy

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The study of linguistics involves subjects of immense complexity, across a wide variety of subfields and in a great number of contexts. Instructors must adapt to a wide variety of pedagogical tasks and learners of different ability levels. But I believe that in the pursuit of effective pedagogy in language and linguistics, across various tasks and content areas, a consistent pattern can best help students to develop mastery over these challenging subjects and techniques: demonstration, practice, iteration, repetition, and play.

Demonstration

Often, linguistics is divided between theoretical and applied domains, but in the classroom, all linguistics is applied linguistics. In that, I mean that effective pedagogy in linguistics requires demonstrating to students how language works and how it is studied in real-world research contexts. We might think of syntax as the most theoretical of linguistic subfields, for example, but no syntax class would be complete without the instructor demonstrating the process of drawing a syntax tree, slowly walking students through the process. Part of the beauty of the study of language is that many of the same processes involved in real-world data collection and analysis can be brought into the classroom without special equipment or facilities. That makes these demonstrations very "real" for students, showing them exactly how professional linguists perform their intellectual work outside of the classroom.

For my own research interests in corpus linguistics and textual processing, this kind of demonstration is easily performed with a computer and a projector. The applications and programming languages used in corpus linguistics can be shown to students in real time, letting them see the particular tools and techniques that are appropriate for different data sets and different research questions. From the most polished end-user interfaces to the most utilitarian command lines, students can best learn by seeing tools in action. While there is always reading and theoretical discussion to be had, there is no substitute for showing students the actual programs that allow us to explore large collections of machine-readable texts. Demonstration demystifies content for students and helps show them that linguistic inquiry doesn't have to be intimidating.

Practice

All the demonstration in the world won't help students if they never get an opportunity to try for themselves. Practice here means having students undertake the real mental work of linguistic study themselves, applying theories and processes to questions about language To again use the example of syntax, most effective syntax classes will involve students producing tree diagrams personally, in order to better grasp the underlying theory and to develop an intuitive understanding of the theories and techniques involved. While preparatory discussion is necessary in almost any learning domain, students learn best by doing, in linguistics as in many other domains. Again, the study of language affords us with the ability to bring our subject matter into the classroom in a very direct way, representing a great boon to our pedagogy.

When it comes to the use of computer programs to analyze text, the principle again requires little more than computer access for students. Because most of the tools used by researchers and practitioners are available for free download, and because there are many large and data-rich corpora that are similar available for free use, students can utilize them both in the classroom and out. This affords teachers with the opportunity to lead students through specific techniques, helping them to get acquainted with various applications in the supportive atmosphere of the classroom, and then direct them to continue developing their skills outside of class. In contrast with many other subjects of research inquiry, corpus linguistics does not require an expensive laboratory or facilities. Students should thus always be encouraged to get their hands dirty and use these techniques, rather than to simply read about or discuss them.

Iteration

While linguistics may therefore be a subject (or set of subjects) that is particularly accessible, that accessibility should not be confused with simplicity or lack of difficulty. Every form of linguistic inquiry, from syntax to semantics to sociolinguistics to historical linguistics and more, has elements of extraordinary theoretical and practical complexity. Language is a subject of incredible richness and depth. This makes the discipline fertile ground for research and exploration, but it also means that students can often feel lost, falling behind quickly if they fail to keep up with the subject matter. For this reason, it is essential that instructors approach the teaching of linguistics as an iterative process. I believe that linguistics must be taught through a series of small, discrete steps, each building on the next. When I explain a topic in language or linguistics, I go out of my way to make the connections with earlier learning explicit, using analogies to help explain the various leaps in understanding that are necessary to understand subject matter. Students must become practitioners themselves, but in order to do so, they must first be led carefully through small, incremental steps.

There's little getting around the fact that, while free software and corpora have broadened access to the computerized analysis of large collections of text, the learning curve for many of these applications can be punishingly steep. While some interfaces, such as Google's N-Gram viewer, are accessible and intuitive, many are complex and intimidating. Many of them are difficult to use for the same reason that they are available for free: they are not the products of large software companies with correspondingly large staffs and budgets, meaning that they have not had the benefit of large-scale troubleshooting and interaction design. This is particularly true of command line interfaces, or of types of textual analysis that occur directly through programming languages like R. Because of the difficulty in using these systems, it's important that students be taught incrementally, guiding them step-by-step towards solving particular research questions, so that they will eventually gain comfort and familiarity with the software.

Repetition

There's little that is flashy about endorsing repetition as a core pedagogical concept. In fact, there's something remarkably old-school about it, especially as it brings to mind the "bad old days" of rote learning and mindless churning. Well, I would certainly never advocate for repetition for its own sake, and I recognize that any learning activity that students perceive as drudgery is unlikely to result in real learning gains. I instead try to utilize a directed, smart kind of repetition in linguistics pedagogy. Repetition should always be done in the service of meeting a particular pedagogical end, never for its own sake. But there are times when the only way for students to absorb important techniques and understanding is through repeated practice. When I learned syntax from a professor that I grew to respect and admire, I was first put off by the amount of sentence trees she had us create, as I saw this as indicative of an old fashioned, stale pedagogy. But today I recognize that it was precisely that repetition that enabled me to flourish in her class, and which impressed those skills on me in a way that stuck. That practical knowledge, in turn, deepened my theoretical understanding.

The type of mental work done in corpus linguistics and text processing can benefit from this kind of repetition. While the computer does the heavy lifting for us, how we ask the computer to do what we want can be tricky. Asking students to apply the same techniques and programs to different data sets, or to explore the same data sets with different research questions, will give them ample opportunity to truly grasp the lessons at hand.

Play

All of this may make the study of linguistics sound like a terribly formal, intimidating affair. But in fact, I believe that these moves exist in the service of intellectual play. Once students have made the difficult moves of absorbing this knowledge and these abilities, they will be able to explore their own questions in their own ways, learning more from unstructured exploration and play than any course could ever teach them.