MODERNA SPRÅK

Fillmore on Language Teaching

26-29 mars 1990 gästades Göteborgs universitet av professor Charles Fillmore från University of California at Berkeley. Fillmore, som är en av världens mest namnkunniga lingvister, hade inbjudits att hålla de första föreläsningarna i den nya serien "The Gustaf Stern Memorial Lectures on Semantics". I samband med besöket gjorde den göteborgske lingvistikprofessorn Jens Allwood för *Moderna språks* rakning denna intervju med Fillmore om språkundervisning, ett ämne som inte tillhör Fillmores normala arbetsfält.

Jens Allwood: So, we're going to talk a little about language teaching, and glancing over your curriculum, I notice that you do have some experience as a language teacher.

Charles Fillmore: Yes, as a young man I taught English in Japan for about two years. Then I did have some experience teaching firstyear Japanese at Ohio State in 1961 or 62. That's the only language teaching experience I've had.

JA: But, on the other hand, you have been in linguistics for a long time and you've also learned a lot of languages yourself, so no doubt you must have thought about learning languages and maybe also teaching languages.

CF: Yes, I have.

JA: There have been these controversies, centring round people like Stephen Krashen, people who claim that on the one hand it's possible for somebody to, without any training really, pick up a language intuitively-become linguistically competent-and on the other hand it's possible for somebody to go through a lot of school training, where they learn to describe a language in grammatical terms, without really becoming competent. From your own experience, what do you think of this doctrine?

CF: I'm not very familiar with the Krashen doctrine, but I think I've had both of those experiences. I think that when I learned Japanese

as a young man, I was not aware until many years afterwards that Japanese had preposed relative clauses, or that the clause modifiers preceded the noun. It was not something I was conscious of, but I had obviously learned it. And I wasn't aware that back vowels were unrounded, but then I discovered from my own speech that they were, and somehow L had learned it. I was a linguist interested in Japanese and I was doing lots of analyses, but I hadn't really been struck by these oddities. It wasn't something that I was really conscious of. And, of course, I've done a lot of describing of languages that I've studied without being able to speak them.

JA: So drawing on this kind of experience, what would be your hunch about how efficient language learning should proceed?

CF: For adults?

JA: Yes, let's take adults.

CF: I don't think I have any special insights that aren't completely common in anybody who does language learning, but certainly you would want to learn a language in a context in which you can be exposed to a variety of expression types on a day-by-day basis. But if you're asking me how somebody is going to learn Swedish in Minnes ...., hah, well, in Montana, let's say, I have no idea, because many of the experiences that you have to have in order to do efficient language learning, you just don't get in a classroom situation.

JA: So does it follow from this that classroom teaching of languages is a pretty difficult, maybe even impossible, task?

CF: Well, I'm sure it's not impossible, but I think it depends a whole lot on a very special kind of personality for the teacher, and a very special kind of motivation for the student. Of course, the right teacher can create or evoke that kind of enthusiasm or ambition in students, I guess, but I haven't had experience like that in classes I have participated in. I've never had anybody that I've considered a good language teacher.

JA: So what would be your recommendation to somebody who wanted to learn Swedish in Montana?

CF: Find this kind of teacher I talked about or... JA:
But if you couldn't find that teacher?

CF: OK, then I would guess, study linguistics for a couple of years, and then get books and tapes and movies and just expose yourself to the language as much as you can, expecting that you won't understand most of what you encounter, but keep doing it until it begins to drive you crazy and then rest for a while. [Laughter]

JA: How about saving up some money and taking a flight to Sweden?

CF: Oh, OK, you asked me what would I suggest for somebody who

good advice. But I'm also very much aware that for somebody who is beyond school age, it's very difficult to create the kinds of situations that are useful for language teaching. I mean, for somebody in late middle age like me, it's very difficult to find the right situation. I'm not the person who would be welcome in the kind of school where people learn to cook and sing and everything in the typical kind of immersion programme. They set up schools like that for teenagers and people in early twenties maybe, but not for people like me.

I've had lots of ideas about how I would like to learn a language: I would like to be able to sit down every day with somebody who could answer my questions on the spot as they come up, and who could sit by my side as I'm trying to read the newspaper, or replay a video-tape, and then if I could interview the person, you know, "what would you have said if it had been like this?" and "what should I say in this context?" and so if I had a full-time, highly paid tutor, then I think I could learn a language very easily in a big hurry, but it's not really easy for me to find somebody like that.

JA: Now that would be a very expensive method if we were going to apply that generally.

CF: Right, right, right.

JA: But living in America, you of course grew up with the world's most widely spread and used language. But if you live in Sweden, and grow up with one of the small languages of the world, and if you want to somehow have access to the bigger world, you have to learn languages, and then your method might not be the best method to teach thousands of Swedish children.

CF: No, it certainly wouldn't. It's not a good method at all, but I don't know a good method for teaching somebody who's sixty years old a second language.

JA: But if we leave the sixty-year-old and go back to the schoolchildren, following from what you've been saying here, it seems that you would be much in favour of immersion programmes.

CF: Yes, but I have to tell you that I'm really surprised that somebody in Sweden would be interested at all in somebody else's view of what successful language training could be like, because Sweden and the Netherlands, probably, are the two places where absolutely perfect complete English is acquired by very large percentages of the population. And so, I have the idea that these are places where problems of language teaching have been solved generations ago. Charles Ferguson said he was invited to Sweden once to talk to people about means of language teaching, and he said it seemed so utterly pointless, because everybody he met spoke English as well as most American university students.

this familiarity would turn into secure knowledge. Whereas a programme that is set up to make sure that every student knows and fully understands every piece of information that comes in couldn't possibly work, because no teacher or designer of a language teaching programme could possibly know what information to include and how to sequence it and how to stage it.

JA: So you stress this idea of just being immersed and gradually trying to get close to what happens to people in their own language, and you also stress the idea of having reasons and motives, an idea which seems to resemble the John Dewey maxim of Learning by Doing. In other words, you believe in closeness to spontaneous language acquisition processes, if that can be achieved?

CF: Yes, but I guess reading novels isn't necessarily one of the things that you do in spontaneous language acquisition, but probably most vocabulary acquisition that's done in advanced language learning is done through reading. And most of the words that you learn when you're doing massive, rapid vocabulary learning, you don't learn by looking them up in a dictionary, but you learn by seeing them in many different contexts.

JA: So your idea is that you should read a lot, but not necessarily look up words?

CF: Well, look up words whenever you realize that you don't have an image of what's going on, to see if that will help.

JA: What do you think about writing, then? What's the best way of learning how to write in a foreign language?

CF: I don't really know. I'm sure that lots of experience in writing would be useful, but I have no idea how to give this. I've seen in Japan... unsuccessful isn't quite the word.., disastrous efforts to teach people to write in English. And Japan's a country that puts a huge amount of effort into the teaching of English. They too have lots of movies and music in English, there's just lots of exposure to written English and spoken English in video and movies and so on, but their success is very low.

JA: So it would be interesting to compare Sweden and Japan, then.

CF: Yes, it certainly would.

JA: Well, because the amount of effort put into the teaching of English seems to be fairly equivalent, and there are also some interesting-I believe anyway-similarities between Japanese and Swedish mentality. There are also some interesting *dis*-similarities, and among them, of course, would be the historical relationship between Swedish and English which is much closer than between English and Japanese, and that probably is a contributing factor, but it might not be the only one.

CF: And the languages are so different. I mean Japanese and English

sense of when an explanation was valid and when an explanation was stupid. And when an explanation was simply unnecessary.

JA: What you're saying reminds me of thoughts I've had in connection with for example intonation. So far we don't have any really good theories of intonation, but even those that we do have are fairly complicated to understand for most people. And I've never yet seen attempts to explain intonation really result in very much better intonation on the part of the learner. It seems that the only way to get that is to mimic and get some kind of internal feeling for how to do it. But one thing, at least in my experience, people do seem to be able to understand more easily is semantics. So what about your lexical frame semantics, could that be used in language teaching?

CF: Well, I would think so. It seems to me that if there's a cluster of words that touch on the same semantic frame, it would be a good idea to make- sure that these words get taught at the same time, and that contrasts and discriminations and relationships between words be made available so that when you're learning the word buy, you're going to learn the word sell at the same time, and you're going to be made aware of how these different words hook up with the same scenario. This way a person would have more than one way of accessing that particular knowledge structure. Or if you learn the word *short, you're going to want to learn the word short* in combination with the word *long,* as one package and in combination with the word *tall* as another package, rather than just learning the word *short* in isolation. So it would be wrong to teach somebody the word *short* used of height and of length as some kind of unified concept and then later on learn *long* and *tall.* Somehow you want to learn *short-long* and *shorttall* as two separate, but linked, packages.

JA: So semantic fields or frames could be a valuable concept in language teaching?

CF: I would think so, yes.

JA: A last question: Some people have fears that you can only learn two languages let's say, and that you shouldn't teach children, let's say, three or four languages. What's your view on this?

CF: I have no data on that, except in the form of knowing people who have succeeded in learning three or four languages, and don't seem to be psychologically damaged by it either [laughter] ... or socially.

JA: So there's hope for multilingualism.

CF: I would think so, yes.

JA: Thank you for this interview.

CF: My pleasure.

(Edited by Mats

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(Selected by Mats Mobärg)