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Keith Davidson: linguistics and English education



Keith Davidson, who died recently, combined a deep and passionate knowledge of linguistics with an equally deep and passionate understanding of the teaching and assessment of English. During the 1960s he was a student on the Institute of Education's diploma programme in Linguistics and English Teaching under Michael Halliday and the IOE English team. Dick Hudson, one of Keith's tutors, remembers him as enthusiastic and bright, and a joy to teach. IOE lecturers Harold Rosen, Nancy Martin and James Britton were developing a pedagogy of English teaching that took account of the language that children brought with them into school, and Michael Halliday was developing an epistemology of language as social semiotic. It is easy to imagine the élan of this pioneering work in education and linguistics and its effect on the young Davidson, who developed an embodied knowledge of the ways in which children learn language and a corresponding awareness of good practice in pedagogy and assessment. He put this awareness into practice when teaching in further education and for the Open University and in his post as University of London Examinations Officer for GCE English Language.

Keith explained linguistics to English educators and English education to scholars of linguistics. He brought together these two audiences in some of his publications. He had a way of informing the imagination of his readers by exploring from alternative perspectives topics in which they did not specialise. "Beyond their GRASP?", an article published in *English Today* in 1998, introduced readers of an academic journal on the English language to NATE's (1997) *Position Paper No. 1* on grammar, spelling and punctuation. It brought together two apparently very different worlds: young children at a birthday party and English curricula and examinations. The paper is structured around familiar topics of language in education (speaking, writing, grammar), but Keith starts with the children, four-year-old triplets, two of whom are busy talking about what interests them (the third, Joe, is reading a book). The paper's subtle linguistic analysis of what the youngsters say is a superb demonstration of how much "unconscious" understanding of the syntactic and phonological systems of language is already evident in children's speech. It also demonstrates the author's conscious linguistic understanding of what the children are doing. Tommy, into dinosaurs, is proud that he can say "tyrannosaurus rex". He treats it "as a single, six syllable, lexical item, assigning the main stress to the final syllable [and] enjoying the alliterative sequence of the syllable initial /r/ feature, if still in a somewhat uncertain version [u]". There is even, Keith shows, a historical literariness in Tommy's use of language (as Bakhtin insisted, we are born into a language culture). At the end of the birthday party, Tommy collapses on the sofa, complaining happily:

I'm/all tired/OUT ^ with/all these/PREsents

Keith points out that this is the Old English measure: two half lines, with two stressed syllables in each, marked by caesura and repetition – each, in this case, corresponding to a clause and a tone unit. “Such things,” he observes with ironic pleasure, “are not covered by the National Curriculum!” (Davidson 1998, 7)

Davidson’s critique then shifts a gear. He turns from the children’s personal, tacit (Polanyi [1966] 2009) grasp of language (*grasp* suggesting here held and felt knowledge) to “GRASP”, an acronym for grammar, spelling and punctuation used in a “vacuous” (Davidson 1998, 9) government statement published in 1996. In this, the banal and debatable assertion that children “need to be taught how the English language works” segues into an emphasis on “correct English” which must be tested “rigorously”. In an earlier (1994) article neatly titled “Double Standards”, Keith shows how thirty years of informed debate had led only, in policy terms, to this lamentably ignorant, reductive concept of “correct English”. “Double Standards” reviews the political and cultural conflicts over several decades around the notion of curriculum and over what constitutes the subject of English. Davidson shows how different positions emerged and gained control, shifting the focus from what was an essentially bottom-up model of curriculum development, albeit one informed by the examination system, to one dominated by the political rhetoric of “correctness” and “discipline” in which “Standard English” was equated with “standards in English” – hence “double standards”.

Following the Lockwood Report’s (1964) stringent criticism of teaching “traditionally prescribed rules of grammar which have been artificially imposed on the language”, Halliday’s programme in Linguistics and English Teaching produced the primary *Breakthrough to Literacy* materials and the secondary project *Language in Use*. John Dixon’s report on the 1966 Anglo-American Dartmouth Seminar, *Growth through English* (1967), informed the thinking of the Bullock (1975) Report *A Language for Life*, which recommended closer attention to language both within and outside the classroom (including the language of the media) as a means of developing students’ “growth through English”. But this linguistic understanding of the process of education cut no ice with John Marenbon, a medieval philosopher and Director of Studies at English at Trinity College, Cambridge, whose strange (for an academic) scorn of “learned circles” and “experts” (Davidson 1994, 8) presaged Michael Gove’s similar dismissal of the “blob” of educationists 25 years later. In a pamphlet for the Centre for Policy Studies, Marenbon (1987) opined (in direct opposition to Lockwood 23 years earlier):

The terminology of traditional grammar remains the best instrument for describing the broad features of standard English, and so of prescribing usage to those learning it.

Despite the 1988 Kingman Report, the 1990 LINC project, Brian Cox’s *Cox on Cox* (1991) and the 1993 *English for Ages 5 to 16* proposals, Marenbon’s terms – “traditional grammar”, “standard English”, “prescribing usage” – prevailed in framing the revised National Curriculum for English. In the later (1998) paper “Beyond their GRASP?”, Keith summarises the limited notions of grammar that, despite all the debate of the previous thirty years, went on to inform the subsequent agenda of the Teacher Training Agency, the National Literacy Project, the revised National Curriculum, the assessment of “Spelling Punctuation and Grammar” in different key stages and of “the quality of language” in the A-level examinations at 18 + . “Grammar” in all these contexts is taken as read (“we all know what we mean by ‘grammar’”) and regarded as rules of correctness.¹

The condemnation is general but justified. Davidson had a capacity to bring a granular assessment to the big picture which ensured that his readers did not miss the repercussions for policy and its implications for practice. He denounces decontextualised “guessing games on random tests of spelling and punctuation”, and his forensic analysis of the grammar tests, extant at the time, illustrates the ignorance of question setters who cannot recognise

subordinate clauses even in their own examples. For example, “It was the only sport I was good at” is presented as a simple sentence with just a main clause. Davidson condemns the lack of “any coherent and well-defined descriptions” of English grammar in the policy documents, excoriating an emphasis on testing grammar as “futile” in the circumstances (Davidson 1998, 11). It is a measure of Keith Davidson’s passion as well as his concern for children that the position paper is dedicated to all children, teachers and carers forced to endure a flawed grammar testing regime. He concludes: “We can do better than that”. Even when reviewing the past, he was looking to the future and thinking about the young people and teachers in classrooms all around the country.

During the last two decades of his life, Keith observed the calcification of a truncated concept of language within the UK English curriculum. The governmental manifesto for English in the 21st century, *English 21*, was, he noted, “still largely predicated on the continuing myths of the monolingual ‘native speaker’ and a single uniform ‘standard English’” (Davidson 2007, 48). Today the GPS (grammar, punctuation and spelling) tests for primary school children work as a powerful *de facto* language policy (Cushing 2020). Young students’ ideas of “grammar” concern “correctness” at word and clause level and are often conflated with “spelling” and “punctuation” (Cushing and Helks 2021). Meanwhile, teachers of GCSE English Language find that its feature-spotting approach to language doesn’t enhance young people’s communication skills, nor prepare students for language study at A level, or linguistics in higher education (NATE 2021, 10).

However, Keith’s view of language was international. He and his wife Sylvia travelled widely and enjoyed plurilingual language practices. The Swiss Constitution, he reported with delight (Davidson 2010, 15), was “published on the Swiss Confederation website in Spanish and Portuguese (for the South American ‘Swiss?’), Arabic and Japanese (for commercial and financial interests?), and Nepalese (?), as well as of course in English, in addition to the National Languages – with attention paid to ensuring the continuing viability of Romansh and Italian, both evidently felt to be at risk”. He reminded his readers (Davidson 2007, 48) that speakers of English in the UK constitute only about 16% of the 380 or so million Anglophones worldwide. He saw a particular challenge for English education in the 21st century: how to equip young native English-speaking people with open, flexible ways of communicating in a multilingual economy. He was highly supportive of studies in multilingualism and proposed that English should in the future be embedded in a more broadly conceived language curriculum. There were implications, he claimed, for teacher training, for linguistic expertise and for professional development – not least that “English” and “language” teachers should learn how to talk to each other (Davidson 2007, 49). Keith Davidson’s insight and engagement with key issues of linguistics and English education is an invaluable legacy to students and teachers of language across the English-speaking world – and beyond.

Note

1. For a genealogical account of concepts of grammar and standard English, see Hodgson and Harris (2021).

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