It has been said that there is no such thing as a "Language for General Purposes" (LGP), but only a set of "Languages for Specific Purposes" (LSP), LGP being simply the "Language for the Specific Purpose of General Communication" (1).

According to this view, the language as a whole is made up of a number of "sublanguages" or "micro-languages" with few points in common: for example, the article the and the past tense of verbs are formally identical in both EGP and ESP, but the functions and use of the and of the past tense differ between EGP and ESP, and this difference is relevant for meaning (2).

Quite the opposite philosophy lies behind the Council of Europe's "Modern Language Project". In this perspective, LGP is regarded as a common core that can be individuated inside a language and
it is independent of the speaker's (or learner's) social role or professional needs; it includes the Threshold Level, which permits survival and everyday communication and expression. The glottodidactic consequence of this approach is that teachers feel they can teach LGP even beyond the Threshold Level, but they feel at a loss in all LSPs but the LSP of Cicero's "cultura animi": the languages of literature, history, art, etc. As teachers in Europe are to an ever-increasing degree being requested to teach LSP, this situation results in professional frustration.

As English is the principal medium of international communication in special areas - (commerce, science, technology, telecommunications, etc.), native-speaker teachers of English tend to teach ESP as EGP dealing with non-literary topics and seldom accept Widdowson's hypothesis that an LSP is not a textual variety of a language, but a variety of "scientific discourse", that is, the "universal" language of science, whose "deep structure" is common to all LSP users and can be actualized using the "surface structures" of the various natural languages (3). In this sense, the real LSP teacher is the technical teacher of physics, chemistry, nautical science, and so on (4).

What options do teachers have? Go on teaching LGP, where they feel on their home ground, or set out to study the topics of the LSPs they teach? The aim of this article is to offer a solution to this problem by discussing the difference between LGP and LSP, and especially by suggesting where the "razor should fall" (5), and to attempt a more consistent definition of the teacher's role in LGP and LSP.

1. Is there a razor's edge?

Einstein phones Fermi: they exchange greetings, comment on the weather, then discuss some mathematical problems and conclude by making an appointment for 12:30 in the canteen. Of the (conservative estimate!) four speech acts that make up this speech event, the 1st, 2nd and 4th would usually be defined as EGP, the 3rd as ESP - i.e. incapable of being understood by non-scientists. Such a clear-cut dichotomy, however, is not always apparent: from simple LSP to the most formal LSP there is a continuum. Is there a "razor's edge" separating LGP from LSP? And what may it consist of?

Many views have been held on the putative razor's edge, and methods have been proposed (6), in both the formal and in the functional fields. Here are some of the main points reflected in a rapidly growing body of literature (7):

i. Phonological features. Lutoslawka wonders whether LSP principally comprises written texts or whether it has an oral dimension, too (8). Others claim that pronunciation does not change when speakers talk about computers or buying tickets. There are, however, differences: a. LSP needs longer and longer words, almost holophrases, with consequences for stress and intonation; moreover, suffixes often complicate matters by changing the original stress. b. Oppositions such as micro/macro, hypo/hyper, etc., are difficult - not only for non-natives; and not only in English! (9)
ii. Morpho-syntactic features: the high frequency of passive and stative forms has always been pointed out, together with nominalization, that is, the substitution of a noun for a verb. But, as already mentioned, the use of articles and the choice of tenses is different too; prepositions are often deleted; the need for "de-personalization" requires the abuse of -ing forms in English, of impersonal verbs in romance languages, etc.;

iii. Lexical features: for non-linguists this is the only difference between LGP and LSP: "words" become "terms", where connotative traits are suppressed, no cultural or diachronic semantic shift may occur (and this makes for the "obsolete" terminology of the LSP of law, for instance); moreover, the frequency of words is quite different in LGP and LSP and this includes also non-technical words. Lastly, there is a strong influx of neologisms, new words formed on the basis of Greek or Latin roots, with Greek, Latin or English affixes - which once again supports the idea of LSPs as the surface actualizations of a universal "scientific discourse";

iv. Textual features: LSP texts are "monotonously" paratactic, coordination rather than subordination being the general stylistic rule; moreover, LSP text structure is based on "conceptual paragraphs" (10) and the rules of its rhetoric are strict and codified;

v. Functional features. LSP performs only a limited number of functions, both in Jakobson's model, in those of Bühler and Halliday and in Wilkins' notional/functional perspective. Without going into details, it may be said that, in respect of function, LSPs are mainly referential and instrumental, and that they are not emotional, personal or poetic.

vi. Extralinguistic features: in LSP the relation between linguistic and non-linguistic codes, such as graphs, formulae, grids (which, for example, are a substitute for morphology in invoices and business correspondence) is stronger than in LGP. Moreover, while in LGP non-verbal codes are used to reinforce the meaning which is carried by language, in LSP they are essential to the meaning.

However interesting, these points - which should always be borne in mind by LSP teachers and textbook writers - are not enough to make a razor to cut the continuum.

2. A situational razor
Fifty years ago J.R. Firth pointed out that not only does the signifiant depend on the situational context, as sociolinguistic studies later made clear, but also the signifié or the meaning itself (11). We believe that an analysis of the models of interaction of language and social life (to echo Hymes' well-known phrase) within the framework of the "situational context" (in Firth's terminology) may help us define LSP vs LGP.
In our previous analyses of the nature of LSP we used Jakobson's communication model (12) integrated with Fishman's latest definition of "situation" (13). LSP was thus defined as a special relation between participants, aims and topic and was defined as the language of speech events where both participants are specialists in the topic and aim at non-ambiguous communication.

According to this definition, if only one participant is a specialist the LSP he uses is not an instrument with which to communicate, but only a means with which to state social superiority (lawyer/client, doctor/patient), to produce psychological changes (hypnotizer/hypnotized), religious effects (priest/believer during sacramental rites), and so on. If the aim is other than "non-ambiguous communication" (and in the examples above it is) the LSP turns into something different: it can shift towards a sort of jargon used in order not to be understood by other participants in the situation, or it can work as a status symbol, and so on.

The above definition is useful in defining the teacher/learner roles (non-specialist/specialist as concerns the topic but vice versa as concerns the language) and the aim of LSP learning: "non-ambiguous communication". But it turns out to be a deficient definition as ambiguity may be language-oriented or topic-oriented, the former being the teacher's problem, the latter the learner's...

If we consider, however, what happens in a real school situation we find that the relations between teacher and learner, and between either of them and LSP, are more complex and can only be analysed by using Hymes' model of speech.

Among Hymes' components of speech some are not LSP-marked, such as setting (the physical circumstances of the speech act), channel (even if some LSPs require only one type of channel, e.g. maritime telecommunications (14)) and norms of interaction.

Other components have already been dealt with, such as: message form and contents; the key which must always be neutral, to prevent ambiguity; the genres which are often strictly defined and rhetorically predetermined (flowcharts, etc.) to avoid ambiguity; to help non-natives, to prevent diachronic or cultural shifts; also the choice between the varieties of speech, mainly the register, is pre-determined by the condition of non-ambiguity.

There are however four more components in Hymes' model that can help describe the nature of LSP and define the LSP teacher's role. They are all related to the participants. According to Hymes there are many different models of speech event, requiring from one to a large number of participants (e.g.): an addressee sends a spokesman - speaker - to speak to an audience - hearers - who will take the message to a series of receivers, only one of whom may be the real addressee: this is typical of political and academic life); in LSP, as it has been defined above, the model is mainly dyadic - specialist to specialist. Now, in LSP teaching, the texts may be either authentic texts (teacher and learner thus
becoming an intrusive audience) or textbook texts, addressed to either (or both?) the teacher (linguist) and the learner (the specialist). This seems to be a first source of ambiguity — the ambiguity that was to be avoided by means of LSP.

Secondly, Hymes points out the importance of the scene (the "psychological setting, the cultural definition of an occasion") and of the norms of interpretation. Even if the teacher and the learner belong to the same speech community, where LSP is concerned they work in two different cultural scenes, one on the L the other on the SP of the acronym LSP, with each of them mastering the norms of interpretation in his/her field, and ignoring the other participant's norms.

Lastly, as far as purposes are concerned, Hymes contrasts the social outcomes of an event (and LSP texts have this end) and the personal goals strictly linked to the "here and now" of the situation. Such goals should have no place in non-ambiguous LSP texts, free from time and space constraints. The problem is twofold, that the purpose/outcome of an authentic LSP text is upset and falsified when the text is used as teaching material, and that a tailored LSP text has a didactic goal, which is alien to the nature of LSP.

LSP and LGP are clearly separated, in a situational analysis. But the very relation between LSP and the situation requiring its use seems to point at the impossibility of teaching LSP ...

3. The teacher's razor
A four level scale has been proposed to measure the impact of the "specialistic" component in one LSP: LSP may be at a popularization level, at a specialistic level, at formulation level (the highest that "human sciences" like history, literature, philosophy may reach, however quantitativistic be the approach), at formalization level (15).

Level one (popularization LSP) does not involve special teaching problems. Here the addressee is a non-specialist, as, indeed, is the teacher. In fact, such a level of LSP is often reached in advanced LGP courses, and we have suggested that a model of LSP-oriented teaching units may be studied to cope with this level (16).

The razor's edge is the point at which the average teacher's knowledge of the specific topic is no longer sufficient to cope with specialised LSP (level two). The experienced LSP teacher (17) may be at ease with some second level texts, but levels 3 and 4 call specifically for the specialist; they may not be taught by a language teacher as they concur with the scientific growth of the scientist (or lawyer, critic, physician, historian, etc.) in the knowledge of the "universal scientific discourse" of the specific field.

Thus, in a glottodidactic perspective LGP and LSP are clearly separated. Teachers, however, are required to work at level two,
which is beyond their competence, especially when they teach a
language other than their mother tongue (and this is the "norm",
except in English-speaking countries). What is the answer?

The only way is to transform some stock phrases of the rhetorics
of glottodidactics into reality! "Focus on the learner", for
example. In this region beyond the razor's edge the teacher no
longer has a monopoly of knowledge; he must collaborate with the
pupil in working on a text with whose topic the teacher is not,
and does not need to be, familiar, so long as the learner is;
the learner-specialist is the addressee, the teacher is no more
than an instrumental participant, according to Hymes' model.

Teacher and learner have different backgrounds, but they share a
common instrument: the LSP text they are studying. Their work
will be effective, however, only if each of them realizes the
nature of their respective roles and the differences between
their scenes and norms of interpretation, and the implications
for the "authentic" exploitation of LSP texts.

NOTES:
(1) P. STREVENS, "Special-purpose Language Learning: a Perspec-
(2) These two aspects are studied in: L. SELINKER, J.L. TRIMBLE,
Rhetorical Principles and Grammatical Choice" and "Grammar
and Technical English", all published in Forum and collec-
ted in The Art of TESOL (1975) and A TRPL Anthology, (1980)
Washington D.C., I.C.A.
(3) H.G. WIDDOWSON, Explorations in Applied Linguistics, London,
O.U.P., 1979, includes several studies on LSP. This "univer-
salistic hypothesis" has been discussed in P. BALBONI "Le
microlingue: considerazioni teoriche", in Scuola e Lingue
Moderne, 5/6, 1982.
(4) This position has been pointed out as highly effective in
(5) R. TURNER, "A Note on 'Special Languages' and 'Specific Pur-
pposes'", in UNESCO Alsed-LSP Newsletter, 1, 1980.
(6) A. CILIBERTI (ed.), L'insegnamento linguistico per "Scopi
Speciali", Bologna, zanichelli, 1981, individuates four main
approaches to such "razor making": a quantitative approach,
including stylistic, functional and register-based analyses;
a universalistic approach (see note 3); textual approaches;
last, approaches based on need analysis.
(7) The bibliographical corpus we have worked on is described in
P. BALBONI, "Le microlingue: Guida bibliografica", in Scuola
e Lingue Moderne, 10, 1983.
(8) J. LUTOSLAWSKA, "Reading Technical English", in The Art of
TESOL (see note 2), p. 248: "I cannot recall an occasion on
which I have heard two men pronounce this word in the same
way".
(9) Just consider the French of medicine in such a series: apo-
physe, épiphysé, hypophyse, hiperphyse; or the Italian of
metallurgy: di fusione, diffusione; and so on.
(10) See the essays in note 2, for further details.


(12) Six factors are taken into consideration by Jakobson, the Sender and the Receiver of the Message, which uses a Channel, deals with a Topic and is codified in a Code.

(13) The situation is defined by Fishman taking into consideration the participants' roles (and, we may add, their purposes), the topic, the where and when.

(14) Indeed, there seems to be one LSP generated just because of the channel and now used with other channels as well: it is the Q Code of marine radiotelegraphy. See P. BALBONI, "The LSP of Marine Tele-Communications", in M. PERRIN (ed.), Today's provisions for tomorrow's needs, Bordeaux, Université de Bordeaux II/UNESCO/AILA, 1985.

(15) G. FREDDI, Didattica delle lingue moderne, Bergamo, Minerva Italica, 1979, ch. 7.
