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Motivation and Authenticity: Creating Meaning in the Language Classroom

Our best effort to make sense out of the anarchy of existence.

(R. McKee, *Story*)

We are left with, transactions, but where is the individual? the individual, but where is the other? patterns of behaviour, but where is the experience? information and communication, but where is the pathos and sympathy, the passion and compassion?

(R.D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience*)

Introduction

There is more than merely a vague sense of futility and falsehood in a ‘practical’ language lesson where explicitly ‘useful’ structures and vocabulary are presented by the teacher, then practiced and reproduced by accommodating students. More than a vague sense of falsehood, we may immediately recognise the synthetic nature of the lesson: the immediate context (a classroom instead of a shop or street), the prescribed (and limited) language, the lack of ‘real-life’ hurdles (strong accents, unexpected vocabulary or non-standard usage). What may be effective in helping students to cope with certain, predictable transactions may not be so effective in helping them learn, or even appreciate, ‘language’. And in adhering to a communicative approach to language teaching (as it has been interpreted up to now), we risk failing our students in a more profound way: through language, students ought to face crucial issues of meaning and rhetorical possibility, the understanding and mastery of which one might consider ‘life skills’. In a university context, a limiting, transactional approach to language presents language largely devoid of meaning and virtually empty of personal significance, thus becoming instantly forgettable. Instead, we might rather consider language which is full of meaning, emotionally charged and so, possibly, memorable.

Choosing what to learn

Every language teacher and student is faced with the obvious dilemma of how to learn what is infinite. It is a commonplace that language is capable of infinite utterances¹, and any student is woefully aware of the (admittedly finite but) huge amount of vocabulary to be assimilated when

¹ See, for example, YAGUELLO (1998, 23).

grappling with a foreign language. The issue of selection thus becomes of fundamental importance, not so much in helping a student to learn the ‘right’ vocabulary, but in the perceived surrender-value of the contents of any lesson. If a student regards an item of language as being personally significant and having purpose beyond the classroom, then we can expect a higher degree of intrinsic motivation². But this practical element should not obliterate the personal meaning: ideally the two might go hand in hand. Certainly, an experienced instructor might provide clues as to the significance and broader social context of a piece of language.

But what ‘pieces of language’ should we use in a language class, and how should they be presented? What context should they be given? How may we render them truly meaningful in the inevitably artificial atmosphere of a language lesson? A simple answer is to follow a coursebook, which provides an ‘honest’ context of learning a language at some speed (though little else) and a selection of very practical choices as to ‘what’s important’, or ‘what to learn next’. It is exactly here that we run into our main problem: if a teacher follows a coursebook then linguistic choices are made outside the classroom, and a long way from the reality of the student. The language is homogenised and standardised: it lacks the numerous characteristics of linguistic ‘reality’ (*e.g.* ambiguity, redundancy, irregularity etc)³.

Can Literature Help us?

The debate on authenticity is well-known and well-rehearsed⁴; it is enough here to reiterate the point that a typical communicative lesson will tend to deal with structures and vocabulary in an imagined context and with a detached sense of meaning. Literature might offer something different: indeed, it is widely reported as being considered ‘authentic’ and very motivating’ in language classes (Lazar [1993]). But what exactly does literature offer? Wasn’t it thrown out of language teaching years ago, seen as fuddy-duddy and unhelpful when you are in an interview or at the post office?

There are perhaps two major elements to consider:

1) Literature is one of the few examples of language that really can be in context and in a true linguistic sense, ‘authentic’ in a classroom: perhaps the only natural place to read a poem for most people is in a teaching environment. Certainly students have told me that much in the past.

² See Feuerstein’s Features of Motivation, quoted in WILLIAMS – BURDEN (1997).

³ See, for example, YAGUELLO (1998, 23 and *passim*).

⁴ For a brief appraisal of the advantages and disadvantages of authentic material in classrooms, see UR (1996, 150) and for an effective summary of the points at issue and major authors involved, see JORDAN (1997, 113-14).

2) We mentioned the rather vague dissatisfaction with communicative language teaching and some of the concomitant clever-clever practice and production activities (*e.g.* classic information-gap tasks where students have different pieces of information about a party or product prices, on cards). Perhaps we can try to find an answer to this dissatisfaction through the understanding of language and meaning.

An examination of meaning will hopefully lead to a clearer picture. If we begin with the idea that asking students to do an information-gap activity with half-filled cards is essentially unsatisfactory because they all know they can look at their partner's information, 'if they really want to know the answer', then we are closing in on the fundamental question. Students are generally very accommodating and will 'do' the activity, but is it memorable? Authentic? Does it have true communicative value? Trying to understand a poem, figuring out the rhetoric of a speech, appreciating a song seems to be essentially much nearer to 'real' communication.

What are Texts from Literature?

But what constitutes a literary text, and what constitutes 'authentic' communication? We cannot avoid concentrating on the issue of 'meaning' in language and so in literature, and, subsequently on what constitutes meaningful interaction and activity in the classroom. At this point we may question the common dichotomy made between 'normal, everyday language' and literature. Firstly, literature is an obvious subset of 'language', coming from it, being a part of it and owing a debt to it; more importantly, the idea that 'literary language' is somehow strange or atypical is open to examination: a great deal of creative writing attempts to imitate supposed real speech⁵, and is perhaps nearer to it than excessively 'pasteurised' textbooks. An interesting example of this might be the poem, "yGUDuh" by Cummings⁶. It is also true that conversation sometimes follows literary forms, as when, for example, we quote Shakespeare or Wilde (*e.g.* using *clichés* such as, 'I can resist everything except temptation' from Wilde⁷).

If the language of literature is not automatically different, or irrelevant for everyday life, then we can focus on the nature of the experience of this language in the classroom: literature potentially offers students intense linguistic opportunities for exploration and negotiation of meaning, analysis of pronunciation, intonation and rhythm, appreciation of rhetorical effect. However, these are opportunities which can easily be missed. Many 'communicative' activities which make use of

⁵ As, of course, in numerous modern novels. This point is discussed by BUTLER (1999).

⁶ CUMMINGS (1969).

⁷ WILDE (1892).

songs and poems are not really ‘communicative’ in the truest sense of the word, because they concentrate on activities that intrinsically lack meaning. A superficially attractive song-based lesson in a largely ‘communicative’ textbook may leave us dissatisfied because, at the end of the recommended tasks, the message of the work of art has never been analysed, questioned, or even overtly referred to (*e.g.* ‘English File’, OUP⁸).

So-called ‘communicative’ activities are thus apparently failing to satisfy the principles of communicative methodology: that they operate «with real language in real situations» and that the message «is communicatively useful»⁹. A pop song was almost certainly not written to provide fodder for a gap-fill task twenty years later.

Meaning in Language and the Classroom

All this begs a fundamental question: if we are to consider literature a source of meaningful communication in a language lesson, what theoretical basis is there for this? Where does meaning in language come from? Perhaps the best way to approach this issue for our purposes is to give a very brief description of relevant theoretical positions and then to illustrate them with an example.

Speech Act Theory

Looking principally at Searle and Lycan (Searle [1999] and Lycan [2000]), we gain an idea of speaking (or writing) as a social act, which is observable as such, and which derives what we would call its meaning from its syntactical or grammatical form (studied by linguistics), its social function (‘illocutionary force’) and, lastly, the effect it has on the listener (the ‘perlocutionary act’). Speech Act Theory tends to concentrate on illocutions, and gives great social significance to language. Searle, indeed, sees language as the way humans have developed of creating symbolic reality, and thus it is no great exaggeration to say that he regards language as of absolute social significance: without language you cannot have society. «In institutional reality, language is not used merely to describe the facts, but, in an odd way, is partly constitutive of the facts», and, «Status functions require language or at least a language-like capacity for symbolization»¹⁰. Austin’s description of ‘Felicity Conditions’¹¹ emphasises the importance of positing meaning within the correct context, both logically and socially (Lycan [2000]). I would add an anthropological view of a similar idea in Malinowsky’s description of rituals and rites as ‘meaning in action’¹². Put most simply, Speech Act

⁸ ‘English File’, OUP presentation, Bologna (2000). Various songs are used, including *American Pie* by Don Maclean.

⁹ Morrow quoted in JORDAN (1997, 111).

¹⁰ SEARLE (1999, 133-34).

¹¹ The simplest definition of felicity conditions is in COOK (1989).

¹² Malinowsky quoted in KRAMSCH (1998, 95-6).

Theory views instances of language more as 'doing' than 'speaking' and posits linguistic interaction in a social context: in Austin's own phrase, "doing things with words"¹³.

General Linguistics

Any evaluation of meaning in language has to take into account the ideas of Saussure and of the study of linguistics since. Perhaps the most relevant concepts for us here are the contrast between referent and sign, and between signifier and signified. Saussure divorced language from the 'real world' by describing it as a system of arbitrary signs which obtained their meaning from their interrelationships within the system, rather than from reference to external reality¹⁴. This view of language has significance for my own conclusions as to meaningful items of language and what the role of literature in language learning might be, as will be seen below. Most important for us at this stage is to remember that Saussure's distinction between 'Langue' and 'Parole', or between the theoretical, abstract language shared by us all in a particular speaker community (*langue*) and the imperfect, individual realisations of it we make (*parole*), has been very influential for the whole of linguistics, and affects greatly the linguistic analysis of meaning. After Saussure, abstract, 'fabricated' examples of language were posited and studied in order to achieve a description of the essence of language, and were invariably based on the sentence level (or lower), but context and social and historical realities were largely ignored or neglected. This continued with Chomsky and beyond, and has only been addressed in the last thirty years¹⁵. Saussure thus viewed language as a system, and tried to make an accurate, detailed account of it as such. The effects of this analysis of sentence and syntax may be seen in approaches to language teaching even today.

Information Theory

Lyons describes the salient features of information theory for language students (Lyons [1968]). Many of these have great importance for anyone analysing the concept of meaning: the importance of 'choice' in meaning (no linguistic unit has meaning if completely predictable¹⁶), the fact that information content is in inverse proportion to probability, the presence of 'redundancy' in a substantial realisation of language, and the need for it in effective communication. All of these may be deeply relevant to the study of literature as something meaningful, and potentially able to shed some light onto the problem of comprehension of language by students. We should also take into account the rules of data compression, and, more especially, the fact that decompression has a

¹³ Title of article (1961), quoted in LYCAN (2000, 176).

¹⁴ WIDDOWSON (1996, 21-4) and Saussure, in WIDDOWSON (1996, 90-1).

¹⁵ WIDDOWSON (1996, 91-2); LYONS (1968, especially chapter I).

¹⁶ LYONS (1968) and COHEN – STEWART (1994).

cost in terms of effort and risk of misinterpretation (Cohen – Stewart [1994]). Essentially, you always require access to an algorithm to decode compressed data. This immediately suggested a comparison with literature, which may profitably be envisaged as a form of highly concentrated message.

Literary Criticism and Socio-linguistics

Both of these fields are potential sources for an understanding of meaning in language. Literary criticism has traditionally emphasised the importance of individual appreciation, through close reading of texts¹⁷, along with context¹⁸ and this latter has been given renewed emphasis with the work of Derrida and Deconstruction, which insists on the direct connection between text and context in the formation of meaning¹⁹. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to state that Deconstruction claims that nothing is truly ‘outside’ the text, which was produced as an ‘interweaving’ of various strands of reality, and meaning is to be discovered by a reader’s experience of it.

Socio-linguistics has re-affirmed the right of students of language to make use of social and historical factors in their explanations of language (Spolsky [1998]), and underlines the importance of external pressures in language’s ability to communicate and mean. Building upon the work of general linguistics, but keen to study recorded items and samples of conversation, the social approach has given analyses of *parole* which take ‘exceptions’ and try to observe patterns in them, perhaps positing explanations based upon hierarchy, or other social realities²⁰.

Discourse Analysis

Perhaps the greatest steps in understanding how communication takes place have been made in the work on discourse, and in the recognition that language is often better analysed at a level above that of the sentence (Cook [1989 and 1994]). Identifying units of linguistic interaction and identifying their cohesion and internal and external referents has been very influential in literary theory and in language teaching. However, this need not be seen as a contradiction of traditional linguistics, but rather, an extension of it, making it much more relevant to ‘real life’ examples or literary pieces. The connections between Discourse Analysis and Speech Act Theory, on the one hand, and Cooperative Principles (see below) on the other, are clear.

¹⁷ See BROOKS (1947) for one example from many.

¹⁸ See, for example, HEWETT (1960, especially pp. 14-6); BROOKS – WARREN (1976⁴).

¹⁹ See DERRIDA (1966 [1976]), ABRAMS (1977) and JOHNSON (1997, *passim*).

²⁰ SPOLSKY (1998, especially chapters I and IV).

Cooperative Principles

Lastly, we are led to an assessment of Grice's *Conversational Implicature*, his 'Cooperative Principle', and the attendant maxims, which have great potential significance for classroom English, but which might also be of some help in understanding literature²¹. Grice's maxims can be summarised most briefly as, 'speak in such a way as to be relevant and informative in any given situation, and listen and interpret in the same spirit'. Although these were conversational maxims, attempting to explain and ensure successful communication, I see no reason to exclude them *a priori* from use in the classroom or even in area of literary communication. Indeed, literary texts are often dialogues, addressed to the reader, or take a form similar to conversation.

A Simple Illustration

It might be helpful at this stage to look at a very simple example to illustrate how the various ideas and theories about meaning I have described could interpret an item of language. If we take the sentence

You pays your money and you takes your choice!

I think it offers scope for indication of the various theoretical positions.

If we use Speech Act Theory to analyse the sentence, then we can suggest that it would leave the obvious a-grammaticality of 'you pays' and 'you takes' to linguistics to examine, or would see them in relation to the social force of the sentence. It would be interested in the 'immediate context' of the utterance, and try to establish what the speaker was trying to *achieve* (perhaps dismissing a complaint). The 'effect' on the listener would also be analysed (possibly offence or incomprehension).

General linguistics (based on Saussure and also Chomsky) may find the sentence more difficult to explain, but would probably concentrate on the a-grammatical elements as intentional variation within the system: the contradiction of 'you' and the inflected present verb form is an example of *parole* which might be mistaken (following Saussure strictly) but can be presumed as a personal choice, introducing an element of unpredictability which can reinforce meaning.

Information theory requires meaning to be completed through *input*, either from the participants in the conversation, or from us as observers. The listener can thus 'make the message work' by applying her/his known information about the circumstances of the utterance, memory of past usage, and the way (tone, accompanying expression etc.) in which it is communicated. The predictable nature of the utterance (it is a familiar expression) would perhaps reduce its

²¹ Cf. LYCAN (2000, 102-14 and 189-95); COOK (1994).

information-bearing capacity, and this idea might be used to explain the common habit of saying only half of a proverb, leaving the ellipse to be processed by the listener, again contributing input in order to reach adequate understanding.

Literary criticism would again weigh context significantly, and would give due emphasis to tone and intensity (*e.g.* if said in a play or in dialogue in a novel) but might also be able to add the extra information that the sentence is in fact a quotation from *Punch* (X.17.1846) and reflect on the proverbial quality of a felicitous literary creation, mentioning the rhetorical effectiveness of the parallelism of the repeated 'you' and 'your'.

Socio-linguistics would be expected to build upon the origin of the quotation, either commenting on *Punch's* repeated habit of coining a-grammatical catch-phrases (numerous examples in the nineteenth century can be found, often in attempted imitation of regional dialects or working-class idiom), or analysing the sociological (or even political) functions implied by the use of non-standard English (another example is the well-known '*We was robbed*' often applied as an intensifier to express disappointment and imply injustice in sport).

Discourse Analysis might connect the sentence with the rest of the conversation, emphasising the logic of the speaker's selection in terms of the whole interaction, and possibly her/his need for an intensifying expression at this juncture, or desire for closure. Discourse Analysis would also emphasise the need for 'shared knowledge' between the speakers for the phrase to be interpreted accurately.

Pragmatics, and especially the co-operative principles put forward by Grice, might have difficulty in explaining an a-grammatical sentence uttered with deliberate intonation (indicated by the exclamation mark in our quotation), but, by assuming the utterance to be in some way 'relevant', would probably arrive at the conclusion that it was an example of intentional 'flouting' of the principles for rhetorical effect. It is possible, indeed, to interpret Grice's maxims as constantly subject to each other: speakers tend to flout one rule to maintain another (*e.g.* here the speaker may be 'ambiguous' in using atypical grammar, but it can be argued s/he is doing so to be 'brief' and 'relevant' (Cook [1989])).

All the analyses add something to our understanding and appreciation of the expression, but perhaps we can emphasise the greater significance of 'context' (and so the role of socio-linguistics, pragmatics and discourse analysis) over a purely syntactical approach.

A Brief Commentary

Analysis of the scientific and philosophical ideas which attempt to explain meaning immediately suggests, I believe, their compatibility rather than disagreement. Almost all of the

analyses could be read together without great contradiction, and all might add something extra to our understanding. However, an exception might be Saussure's vision of language as a closed, self-referential system. Combining the ideas of Saussurian linguistics with our knowledge of information theory leads us to query that system. If it is such, then according to information theory it must be subject to signal degradation. Indeed, this is reflected in reality by increasing predictability reducing the meaningfulness of terms (for example, if we always use the same adjective to express joy, or the same swear-word in anger, we experience a 'diminishing return' in terms of its effect) and by the idea of 'homeostatic equilibrium'²². Noise would also be generated even in a closed system, and meaning lost²³ (this is observed in variations in pronunciation producing misunderstanding).

Thus, it is tempting to contradict Saussure, and imagine language as an open system, and in so doing stress the practical and pragmatic importance of language (even literary language), to suggest that language, and examples of language (*i.e.* texts) are in symbiotic relation to their environment (context), and gain meaning from this. The idea of triggers in encryption and of genetic methods of information transfer²⁴ seem to support the theory, as here one symbol can represent a whole string of detailed information perfectly accurately, provided the 'key' is available or the environment can furnish it.

In a similar way, literary criticism and socio-linguistics also suggest evidence to support the idea of language's need for external algorithms for decoding, and for new input from outside to maintain meaning-bearing capacity. Nietzsche's famous maxim²⁵ that each reader recreates the text s/he is reading is suggestive in this regard, as is Deconstruction's emphasis on the complex process of *Disclosure* and the possibility of multiple readings. And this 'text' may be understood very widely. Register analysis suggests that we use language in many everyday situations in an pre-encoded way, utilising chunks of previously heard text as and when we feel they are effective. «Perhaps we should write permanently in inverted commas, to signal that our voices are not 'our own', – they come to us pre-registered»²⁶. These 'pre-registered' chunks absorb and gain meaning precisely from the context in which they are used and re-used.

The idea of audience (and so audience design) is also strongly implied by Grice, and the theory links well with Searle (see above) and his belief that meaning depends also upon the

²² See LYONS (1968, 90-5).

²³ DAVIES (1998, 32-3).

²⁴ COHEN – STEWART (1994, 341-65).

²⁵ Quoted in SELDEN – WIDDOWSON – BROOKER (1997, 185).

²⁶ The comment is taken from BUTLER (1999). It is perhaps a little exaggerated, but makes what is, in my opinion, a vital point. Language does not derive meaning only from grammar or lexis, and literature is not wholly divorced from 'everyday' language.

receiver. Certainly pragmatics could have a contribution to make to our understanding of literature, as well as its natural application to conversational language or social exchanges using language.

Here we have some conceptual and theoretical ideas which are of direct significance for the application of literature items to teaching language. If we understand meaning in language then using a literary text in a lesson can become an option based upon principles of profound understanding of language, as well as upon beliefs about good teaching practice and lesson content. We might arguably have the added value of working on texts which offer rich opportunities for discussion and analysis of moral values, or for developing greater intellectual subtlety in students. There is every reason to believe that a language lesson is an ideal arena for this sort of thing to take place²⁷.

What we really want to talk about

All at once we can see a genuine opportunity for meaningful language in the classroom: we can describe the individual, share experience, identify passion and compassion through texts which are real because they bring information into the class, and need to be interpreted for the proposed task to be completed successfully. The student may leave aware of something different. Occasionally s/he may want to find out more. Of course this is a 'hit-and-miss' process, and the selection of textual input is a substantial challenge to teacher or course-designer. But difficulty can hardly be a reason not to attempt the task.

Indeed, selection is an issue worthy of a great deal more attention. A classical view of the canon is not perhaps the most suitable, and a broader interpretation of what can be considered a literary text might be crucial in ensuring meaningful experience of language in the classroom. Besides poetry and prose, we have already mentioned popular music, and might also think of film and art as valuable input. It is enough that the choice is principled and the communicative tasks set are engaging and involved in some kind of recognisable message. Here the teacher as mediator takes on a role of greater importance.

Of course, literature implies narrative. Story represents an attempt to make sense of the world, and so the idea of students exploring and making meaning through story becomes intrinsic to the language learning process. It seems hardly coincidental that reading, listening to, and telling stories

²⁷ This is true in the grand philosophical sense, if we think of RORTY (1979) and the 'linguistic turn' in philosophy during the last decades of the twentieth century, and in a more down-to-earth way in that language lessons have, potentially, great freedom in their content.

has been greatly neglected in language teaching until very recently²⁸. There are many issues to deal with; not least among these being the greater complexity of language testing in an environment where literature plays a greater role. However, these are problems to be solved rather than reasons to avoid changing our practice. Presenting grammar in context and lexis that is personally significant is so advantageous as to outweigh difficulties. The alternative is consumer-orientated language communicated by teachers who have 'lost the plot'.

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²⁸ See WAJNRYB (2003) for a new evaluation of the practical importance of narratives in English language teaching.

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