

Meaning and Language Teaching

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1.Introduction:

The acquisition of meaning is a gradual process of progressive discrimination between first and second language lexical items. This can be achieved by massive exposure and extensive reading in the foreign language. "So complex is the semantic structure of a language that it can be acquired only through wide exposure and this in turn can probably only be provided by extensive reading." (Wilkins, 1975:133). Through extensive reading the learner is led to recognize the non-equivalence of L1 and L2 items. He is exposed to the lexical items in natural linguistic contexts, and as a result these items begin slowly to have the same meaning for him that they have for the native speaker. The learner should be exposed to language written by native speakers. This, as a result, will develop the learners' sensitivity to the collocations that native speakers prefer. However, the learner of a foreign language can hardly expect that words will have the same connotations for him as they do for native speakers. His experience of the language can never be as extensive or intensive as theirs. In a foreign language situation, however, taped and video-taped material, films, songs, contact with native speakers and visits to areas where the language is spoken are essential. (Rivers, W., 1983:127)

A language lesson, on the other hand, should not contain new items unless the learner is going to be given opportunity of

practising these items .The content of a unit is therefore is bound to be restricted

to what can be practised in the time available.It is also useful to use texts in which some of the lexical content is intended for comprehension only.To describe meaning of words, it is necessary to look at them in two respects- in terms of their relations with the physical world,and in terms of their relations with one another

2.The Aim of the Research

This work is an attempt to show how meaning can be conveyed in

a language teaching situation.It shows the interrelationship between semantics and language teaching.Language teaching affects us all a parents,students and teachers.This work is useful for language teachers,students of linguistics,trainers and researchers interested in issues related to communicative competence ,the role of functional linguistics in classroom, linguistic study of literary texts and aspects of translation and materials writing.The language teaching situation provides an environment to make us conscious about the various aspects of semantics through the responses of language learners.We have thus made an attempt to relate semantics to language teaching.

3.Types of Meaning

We have three types of meaning:phonological,formal and contextual.

3.1.The phonological meaning includes an understanding of the phonetic structure and phonological function of phonemic units-their contrasts and distributions.Next we will have to consider prosodic features which are 'supra' to phonemic units.In English 'word-stress' is a prosodic feature which plays a very important role in the intelligibility of one's speech.Arabic speakers,for example,

tend to impose the characteristics of their language on English and this can be rectified by contrasting L1 and L2. The units of utterance and tone group can be represented by the intonational features. The units of cluster and syllables are covered by the prosodic features.

The study of the graphational features like / , / , / ; / , / ? / and / ./ will help the reader to get at the intonational features. The suprasentence, sentence and clause units are represented by the graphational features. Groups and words are represented by the prosodic features. (v.s. prosodic). The grapheme is represented by the diacritics features. By suprasentence is meant that unit of writing which is between two / ./s or between the blank space marking the beginning of a paragraph and the / ./ at the end. This suprasentence will be analysed at the phonological and grammatical levels through its constituents.

3.2. At the two sub-levels of grammar and lexis (of the level of form) the teacher will again come across different units at which he has to consider meaning. The different units that are necessary for English at the level of grammar in the descending order of the rank-scale are sentence , clause, group, word and morpheme. Each unit has its own structure and at each element of the structure of a given unit operates or functions a class of the unit next below. This relationship of an element of a structure and a class of unit is one of realization. A class is a group of items that function alike. A given class of items will yield a further subclass. The secondary classes make up a system which is a bundle of distinctive features-both formal and functional. We also have to consider certain syntactic supra-features like 'word order' which is important for the study of the "value" of English forms.

The lexical units are single, compound and complex. The English language teacher has to deal with the nature of the item, its collocational span, its scatter, and its membership in the set. A full

discussion of a formal item will mean its discussion at both the sub-level of grammar and lexis. The lexical item 'strong' is a simple node, with the scatter strong, strongly, strengthen, etc., having on its span the collocates like argue and tea and entering into a set where other member will be power, force and the like. Grammatically, 'strong' is an adjective, it can function as a 'modifier' in a nominal group or a 'complement' in a clause.

It is therefore obligatory on the part of the teacher to discuss the 'value'-both grammatical and lexical-of a piece of language he is set to teach.

It could then be fruitfully shown how in a passage the occurrences, co-occurrences involve all such studies and repetitions of items with certain value produce a specific effect. A good discussion of a literary piece will involve all such studies.

3.3.Contextual Meaning or Content

Context is the meaning of a language at the level of context, the level that links lexicogrammar and situation. The complete meaning of a word is always contextual, and no study of meaning can be taken seriously. Each word when used in a new context is a new word. The disciplines and techniques of linguistics are directed to assist us in making statements of meaning. Firth (1957:19-26) says that meaning has to be regarded as a complex of contextual relations, and phonetics, grammar, lexicography and semantics each handles its own components of the complex in its appropriate context.

Content can be potential or actual (or instantial). The potential content of a language pattern is the sum total of the actual content of the occurrences of the same language pattern. In turn, the actual

content is an instance of the potential content. On the other dimension, the content of a language pattern is partly 'explicit' and partly 'implicit'. In other words, part of the content is denotative and part of it is connotative. The connotative part differs from speaker to speaker and hearer to hearer. The 'implicit' part of the content accounts for figures of speech employed. On another dimension, the content can be partly rational and partly emotive. The emotive part accounts for things like poetic emotion. On a different dimension, we can say that the content is either simple or complex, the latter involving 'ambiguity' of one kind or another and the former being unambiguous. From another angle, the content can be full, that is, complex in itself, or elliptical, that is, demanding the content of language patterns not under direct consideration. Finally, the content of an expression can either be universal or particular (the particular part of the content is that which is culturally determined). The teacher, therefore, will have to deal with all these factors and sort out the 'full' content with all sorts of help he can get from a given text, or cultural pattern of the people described in the text.

From the above discussion, we can suggest that the teacher should keep in mind the following points:

- a.** A complete picture of the meaning of an utterance will involve the study of the three levels of meaning i.e. phonological, formal and contextual.
- b.** The contextual meaning is not that particular to the language community; it extends up to the social and cultural communities. Here again the content of a statement might be universal or particular to a religious, social or cultural community. For example, "He ate his food" is a universal utterance whereas "his engagement was announced" is particular to a cultural community.
- c.** Phonological and formal meanings are particular to the language concerned.

Before the teacher explains the meaning of a given linguistic expression, he needs to remember a few facts about language.(See Nida,1957) .Some of these facts are:

- 1.Forms have areas of meaning.
- 2.Forms reflect cultural differences.
- 3.Different languages subdivide phenomena in different ways.
- 4.Ambiguities occur in all languages.
- 5.There are no exact equivalents between languages.
- 6.There are no exact synonyms within a language.
- 7.All languages show changes in meanings of words.
- 8.To get a comprehensive picture of meaning of an expression in a language we should think in terms of "How or when is this form used.
- 9.All languages can describe and identify all types of phenomena

For a clear understanding of the phonological and formal meanings of an item,we have to consider the items operating in the network of phonological and formal relations of the language.This could be well- handled by contrasting the network of the systems of the foreign language and the first language.

4.Teaching of Meaning

The problem of conveying contextual meaning is a difficult problem.The meaning of concret nouns and the words referring to tangible objects has to be conveyed very carefully and through different means.We also find that different means will have to be adopted to explain an expression.

We can semanticize an expression, that is ,give its situational meaning.We can 'catenize', that is look at the patterns of utterances,e.g. 'This is a book' and 'Is this a book?'Difference in meaning here is conveyed by

(1)Change in pattern,the words being the same,and (2)Change in the intonation.We can also contextualize an expression verbally.Following are the methods of coveying the meaning of an expression:

- 4.1.translation(interlanguage)
- 4.2.interpretation(intralingual)
- 4.3.Direct method

4.1.Translation:

If the teacher has to explain the value of a word,say, 'cousin' he will introduce the Arabic equivalences and contrast their values.He will discuss the fact that 'cousin' stands for 'father's brother son ' , 'father's brother daughter' , 'mother's brother son or daughter'.This we call a formal translation .Next we come to contextual translation.This does not mean just giving a word for word equivalents as in some dictionaries.Here again a comparative presentation of the content of the words of the two languages is in question.If one wants to make translation scientific , the technique will do the maximum in a foreign language teaching situation.By translation we mean bilingual and comparative presentation of items.

4.2.Interpretation is intralingual whereas translation is interlingual.Some teachers choose the interpretation of an utterance in simpler words but in the same language.The simpler interpretation should be within the reader's experience and should fit the context.However ,for the intermediate learners to a certain extent and for the advanced learners to a good extent,the intralingual interpretation helps the students fell well exposed to the active use of the foreign language.This makes them think in the language.

4.3.Direct method excludes the use of the mother tongue in foreign language situation.The teacher tries to establish correlations between the physical world and the linguistic world in a direct

manner. This too implies intralingual interpretation and seeks to create coordinate bilinguals. The educationalists are now realizing that a strict adherence to the direct method, with the exclusion of the native tongue in the classroom, is not fruitful and so a careful use of the native tongue is recommended. However, no simple method can exclusively be adhered to as a method which suits the situation and the need.

5. Problems of Meaning:

The teacher should be familiar with all the noted techniques so that he can deal with the problems he will be faced by. Some of the problems which deserve attention are : ambiguities, abstractions, figures of speech and cultural restrictions.

5.1. Ambiguity:

Ambiguity is the phenomenon of double or multiple signification. It can be lexical or grammatical, e.g.,

Bank (money bank, river bank-lexical)

Visiting professors can be expensive (syntactic)

a. Professors can be expensive b. Visits can be expensive

Ambiguity could also be pragmatic, e.g.,

Six wives of Henry VIII

To some one from a society where polygamy is allowed, it could mean he had all the six wives at the same time; to an Englishman, it means that he had married six women each time after divorcing the previous one. Ambiguity, therefore, is where we can observe any shade of meaning gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language. Empson (1953: pps. 48, 102, 133, 155 and 192) gives seven types of ambiguity. The job of the teacher is to disambiguate the expression with the help of the full knowledge of the literary

piece, the writer and the atmosphere in which the writer was born and grew up.

5.2. Abstractions

Abstractions are part of our cognition and they reveal relationships imperceptible to the senses. Some of the basic concepts about abstractions are:

1. Students should learn to distinguish report from inference.
2. They should learn to recognize definitions.
3. They should learn to think in terms of multiple values rather than only two.
4. Students must be made aware that they abstract and classify, thus emphasize similarities and obscuring differences.

Then the teacher has to keep all these points in mind when he deals with abstractions, classifications and definitions.

5.3. Cultural Patterns.

Practical experience and pattern of behavior vary from culture to culture, as well as from individual to individual within a culture. There is some commonality in the realities of human life everywhere. People eat, sleep or ride. Yet the model of riding may have varying connotations, and therefore, different meanings for members of different cultures may imply status to one and weariness to another. Plenty of differences, therefore, can be noticed in the cultures and life of different nations. The full realization of a linguistic expression demands the understanding of the cultural implication the expression has for the native speaker. The meaning which the words of a language have for the native speaker can be learned only in allusions to the culture of people who speak that language (Rivers, 1965). An allusion to another culture cannot help the student to comprehend the content of language unless their selection and

presentation are most carefully analysed in the light of meanings which will be imposed by the culture of the learners. To gain a growing comprehension of cultural meanings one has to undertake wide readings where words are met in the variety of contexts. This wide reading is imperative for the teachers of foreign languages. A good knowledge of the culture of the native speakers helps the teacher and the learner to distinguish the connotations of an expression from its denotations. Denotations amount to the 'rational content' and connotations to the 'emotive' content. The emotive content is more in literary pieces than in non-literary ones. A teacher has, therefore, to take all these points into consideration to explain the meaning of an expression.

5.4. Figures of Speech

A teacher will have to handle these figures intelligently; otherwise he would make the students feel that these figures are unnecessary ornaments. When a teacher wants to handle a metaphor, for example, he can keep these ideas in mind. Figures like irony and simile demand a careful treatment on the following lines of systematic approach:

1. Metaphor is made up of the vehicle, which is the subject or action that carries the meaning of the metaphor and the tenor which is the meaning of metaphor.
2. The purpose of using a metaphor may be to express likeness or unlikeness, or to point out characteristics of the object talked about, or to startle or shock by juxtaposition of different items.
3. Metaphor is an integral aspect of language, a chief means by which words are given new meanings. This is an essential technique to language teaching.

6.Summary

1. Meaning has to be described and analysed at the level of form and the interlevels of medium and content. It is a product of a network of complex functions performed by different units and features of the given level or interlevel.
2. Meaning can be conveyed in different ways, depending on the stage of learning, the purpose of learning and such other criteria.
3. No single method of conveying meaning will be successful in all the teaching situations. Different methods like translation, interpretation, direct method, semanticization, catenization and contextualization should be made use of as the need arises.
4. A teacher will face different problems which he will have to handle carefully by adopting different methods of teaching.
5. Linguistic problems arise out of the contrasting patterns of the sounds of the two languages. The teacher should be able to spot out the areas of difficulty confronting his students in hearing and producing English vowels, consonants, stress placement and intonation. Arab students, for example, tend to use rising intonation in English particularly in question. They also stress double letters as in connect and correct.
6. Incorrect grammatical structures made by students may be due to carelessness, direct translation from the native language or lack of mastering the English patterns. These patterns can be mastered on the oral level first. The grammatical features of both the native language and the foreign language, therefore, must be analysed and compared to serve as a guide for the teacher and as a basis for preparing textbook materials. It is also preferable to use one grammatical frame rather than many frames to concentrate on the new words and form automatic habits in the use of this frame especially in the case of beginners.

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7. Punctuation marks help in understanding the meaning of the passage more clearly and easily. The most important punctuation marks to be taught are the full stop, the question mark and the comma. The teacher can give special exercises in punctuation.
 8. In teaching vocabulary items the placement of words in larger linguistic context like phrases, clauses and sentences is necessary. The teacher, therefore, should pay attention to the use and associations of words with each other in different contexts. Besides, the coverage of meaning that a word has in a foreign language is not the same as that of the native language. In Arabic, for example, the word/beit/means both house and home.
 9. Students must know the linguistic and contextual features of the foreign language and the culture of the native speakers of that language to understand it and promote intercultural understanding.
 10. In teaching a foreign language translation can be used in four areas: lexical (table), syntactical (it nice for it is nice, angry from you for angry of you), rhetorical (He hits the bull's eyes) and contextual (The repetition of "How are you?" in Arabic as a sign of hospitality while in English it is surprising to repeat such an expression.)
 11. The teacher should be a good model to repeat after him.
 12. Pictures and charts may be used very effectively in teaching all linguistic features e.g., pairs of sounds, vocabulary and grammatical relations.

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