

SECTION FIVE

Procedures of Interpretation

In this section, discourse is discussed not as an artefact to be studied objectively but as something achieved by the application of interpretative procedures. The focus of attention shifts from the analyst to the language user. At the same time we move to a more pedagogic position on the applied linguistic spectrum and consider the consequences of this view for the practical teaching of language. There is an implication here that it is the language user's model of language rather than the analyst's that is more relevant for the learner and this prefigures the argument of the papers in Section Seven.

Paper 11 in this section resembles Paper 8 in the preceding one in that it shows how a change of perspective on the nature of language and the purpose in learning it can lead to a reassessment of the value of previously misprized pedagogic activities: translation on the one hand and the teaching of poetry on the other.

Paper 12 deals with the question of authenticity (a question which I return to in the final section). This is, I believe, an important issue because it has been somewhat uncritically assumed in some quarters that a communicative approach calls for the learner's immediate exposure to genuine instances of language use. This assumption is, it seems to me, open to question on two counts. First, it confuses the ends of language learning with the means by which they are achieved. Secondly, it represents language anthropomorphically, as it were: as if it operated with a life of its own without human involvement. Authenticity, I argue, is not inherent in language but is a function of appropriate response and is realized when sender and receiver engage in interaction mediated by the language.

This matter of mediation is taken up in Paper 13, which concentrates on the question of interactivity in written discourse, a notion which appeared in the previous section. In this paper the argument is that there can be no interpretation without interaction and examples are given of pedagogic activities which will develop an awareness in the learner of the necessarily interactive character of the interpretative process of reading.

11 Interpretative procedures and the importance of poetry

It has long been fashionable to regard poetry as irrelevant to the learning of foreign languages. If it is sometimes reluctantly allowed admittance, it is usually after the main business on the language learning agenda has been completed, as a kind of light entertainment which practical people need not take seriously but which may serve to stimulate interest. In this paper I want to suggest that poetry can be incorporated as an integrative element into a language course and that, properly presented, it can serve as an invaluable aid in the development of communicative competence. I shall argue that although poetry is an abnormal use of language, its interpretation involves the same essentially normal procedures as are required for the understanding of any discourse and that it is precisely because of its abnormality that poetry can be used to direct the learner's attention to these interpretative procedures. The expression 'interpretative procedures' comes from Cicourel (Cicourel 1973) and I shall in the course of my argument draw on (my understanding of) certain ethnomethodological notions regarding the interpretation of discourse. This is because I believe that these notions provide the theoretical perspective which indicates the way poetry can be reinstated as a practical element in a language learning programme.

One can sympathize with the desire of the proponents of structural grading to exclude poetry from their syllabuses. A rationalization of this desire might take the following form. We may say (simplifying somewhat) that there are two main ways in which poetry has traditionally been represented in teaching, and neither of them appears to have much bearing on the practical business of learning a foreign language: in fact they would appear to be contrary to sound language teaching principles. The first represents poems as linguistic puzzles which need to be solved by detailed explanation and the second represents them as aesthetic objects whose essential message can be intuitively perceived by exposure and exhortation. The first way represents poems as complicated texts with little or no reference to their character as discourse and the second way represents poems as a kind of superior discourse conveying special messages without much reference to the way textual features are used in the conveyance. Neither of these representations commends itself to

teachers whose concern is to present language in a carefully controlled manner through a structural syllabus so that each element introduced should be thoroughly understood. The first introduces complexities and requires explanations, whereas it is precisely explanation and complexity which the structural syllabus, as a matter of principle, seeks by careful grading to avoid. The second representation draws the learner's attention away from an exact understanding of linguistic elements whereas it is precisely this close attention to detail which characterizes the design of a structural syllabus. In short, poetry can be seen as a potential source of disruption in the step-by-step learning process: something which might be introduced with circumspection to add variety and relieve boredom but not to be regarded as an intrinsic element in the course itself. A kind of side-show.

It must be noted, however, that this rationalization does not provide a case against the inclusion of poetry in a language learning course in principle. It provides a case against including these particular representations of poetry in a language course based on structuralist ideas. But there are other ways of representing poetry and other ways of approaching the teaching of language.

Over the past few years a number of people have recommended a shift of emphasis from a concentration on the teaching of the language system to a concentration on the teaching of the actual social uses to which it is put. It has been suggested that the principles underlying the structural approach should be revised to accommodate the teaching of communicative functions and in some quarters there have been somewhat more extreme counsels which recommend the rejection of the structural approach altogether. As yet, little in the way of actual teaching materials has been produced which embodies these suggestions and exposes them to tests of pedagogic viability, and it is far too early to say to what extent this shift of emphasis can reasonably be adopted as an approach of general relevance to all teaching situations. But whatever difference of opinion there might be regarding the most effective approach to the design of language teaching courses, everyone would agree that their ultimate purpose must be to develop an ability to handle language as an instrument of communication. Although there may be a delimiting of aims which restricts the skills to be acquired, and of the areas of social activity in which communication takes place, it will be generally agreed that there must be no restriction which denies the learner access to an ability to use the language as a means of communication.

Ultimately, then, the aim of language teaching must be to develop a communicative competence in the language being learnt, although there is room for disagreement as to how this aim might be achieved in different circumstances. Now, having said that, it seems to me that the principal difficulty associated with the structural approach as usually practised

has always been the problem of how to present linguistic elements in extra-linguistic situations or linguistic contexts in such a way as to make the learners aware of the communicative potential of these elements. If at a certain point in the syllabus, for example, one has to introduce a certain linguistic element (a 'sentence pattern' or 'vocabulary item') one might, following time-honoured practice, contrive a classroom situation or a written passage representing a context in which this element can be made to occur with a fair degree of frequency. This kind of contrivance can be an effective means of indicating what meaning a grammatical feature of a lexical item has as an element of the language system, what I have called elsewhere its signification. But it has two rather serious limitations.

In the first place, since one's purpose is to introduce and establish the form and the signification of the element in focus, one is concerned with the possibility and not the probability of occurrence. That is to say, one is concerned with exemplifying the structure concerned as fully as possible and so one's aim is to produce a pedagogically appropriate text. But if the density of exemplification is achieved at the expense of the probability of such density occurring in any normal and non-contrived use of the language, then one produces language which has little value as discourse. Hence one cannot be demonstrating the communicative function of the structure: one is manifesting its form and signification in a text but one is not showing how it realizes communicative value in a discourse. To do this, one would have to think of a situation or a context in which the recurrence of the linguistic structure in question constituted normal use. Though this is possible, it is difficult; and in practice it is rarely achieved.

The first limitation has to do with the teacher's difficulty in reconciling the need for repetition with a natural communicative use of language. The second limitation has to do with the learner's difficulty in abstracting from particular situations and contexts more general conditions of appropriateness. The point is that the communicative value of a particular linguistic element is not a function of its relationship with the context or situation as a whole, but of its relationship with a set of essential conditions for which the context or situation simply provides the concrete realization. When Firth talked about 'context of situation' he made reference to 'The relevant features of participants' and 'The relevant objects' (Firth 1957: 182). The notion of relevance is crucial. For, confronted with a piece of language in a context or context of situation, how does the learner recognize which features and objects are relevant to the communicative import of the language and which are not? Those which are relevant represent the conditions whereby the piece of language counts as a particular act of communication. If one simply brings together linguistic elements with contexts or situations the learner is left to work out the relevant conditions for himself. Obviously he cannot be said to have acquired communicative competence if he only learns a

fixed connection between a particular linguistic form and a particular context or situation. For someone to correctly interpret discourse he needs to be able to recognize relevant conditions in situations he has never encountered before, and the manner in which these give value to structures he may never have specifically associated with these situations in the past. Linguistic ability must be essentially creative. The acquisition of communicative competence involves the learning of interpretative procedures whereby particular situational or contextual factors are recognized as realizations of conditions which determine the communicative function of linguistic elements.

What a language course must ultimately develop in the learner, then, is a technique for deriving the communicative value of linguistic elements as they occur in discourse. The learning of the form and the signification of these linguistic elements, which the structural syllabus promotes, represents a set of facts, a body of knowledge upon which this technique operates to create communication. And communication is created both by receiver and producer. It is common to speak of receptive and productive skills (and even active and passive skills) but these terms refer only to the physiological activity involved. From the cognitive point of view both the initiation and the interpretation of discourse involve creative activity. Learning to comprehend efficiently involves the activation of interpretative techniques or procedures and the same procedures are brought into play in reverse when discourse is composed.

This view of what is involved in realizing the communicative potential of language derives essentially from ideas propounded by the ethnomethodologists. I will not be so imprudent as to lay claim to a complete understanding of what they have to say. Indeed since it is one of their principal contentions that complete understanding is not attainable, they presumably would not want anyone to strive for it. I believe in fact that the very views which they express require that they be expressed obscurely, and that the best way of approaching much of their work is to treat it as if it were a kind of literary writing, a creative rather than an expository form of discourse. Be that as it may, what does emerge fairly clearly from the obscurity is the concept of discourse not as the manifestation of preordained meanings, but as a dynamic process which involves what Garfinkel calls 'practical reasoning' (Garfinkel 1967). Discourse is created as a 'contingent ongoing accomplishment' whereby the participants in an interchange attribute particular value to linguistic elements as they are conditioned by the context and the situation in which they occur. The basic insight that the ethnomethodologists express is that the meanings conveyed in the use of language are not subject to precise specification beforehand in grammars and dictionaries but have to be discovered in the development of the discourse itself. The linguist has led us to think that meanings are fixed in a static well-defined system and subject to vari-

ation in 'actual performance', which in some sense is a distortion, whereas the ethnomethodologists suggest that instead of thinking of variation in meaning we might more profitably think of meaning in variation. In this view, variation cannot be idealized out from linguistic data: it is at the very centre of the communicative process. If this is so, then of course a generative grammar which describes linguistic competence in the Chomskyan sense cannot by definition deal with discourse at all.

One form of discourse which has been a source of some embarrassment to generative grammarians for some time is poetry. In poetry we very often find what Katz calls 'semi-sentences' and 'nonsense strings' (Katz 1964). Now if a grammar represents a speaker's knowledge of his language, how does it come about that he knows how to interpret strings which are not well-formed and so cannot be generated by the grammar? This is how Katz puts the problem:

Though the knowledge a speaker requires to understand well-formed sentences and the knowledge he requires to understand semi-sentences is one and the same, and though a generative grammar can represent all the grammatical knowledge a speaker has and can account for how he is able to understand sentences, yet such a grammar cannot account for how a speaker is able to understand semi-sentences.

This is the somewhat self-contradictory conclusion that he arrives at:

The task a speaker performs when he understands a semi-sentence involves, in addition to his use of grammatical knowledge, the use of knowledge of another kind.

Katz 1964: 402.

But what is this knowledge of another kind? And how precisely is this knowledge and grammatical knowledge 'used'? Again Katz says that the speaker 'utilizes his knowledge of the structure of the language to find a meaning for something that is not well-formed' (Katz 1964: 414). But of course the speaker must utilize his knowledge of the structure of his language to find meanings in well-formed instances of language use as well. The speaker does not simply require a knowledge of his grammar to interpret discourse: he requires a knowledge of how his grammar is used. And although his grammar can be made manifest as usage by citing isolated sentences contrived by the linguist for the purpose of exemplification, it is not actually realized in use through isolated sentences. Sentences simply serve to manifest grammatical rules but they do not show how these rules are used in the dynamic process of discourse development. A grammar cannot tell us how semi-sentences are understood because if they occur in actual use they are not semi-sentences but elements of a

discourse, and a grammar cannot tell us how discourse is understood. It cannot tell us because it does not provide information as to how our grammatical knowledge is actually put to use in communicative behaviour (for further discussion on this and related points see Widdowson 1973).

A number of linguists have pondered on the problem of how to account for what Katz would call semi-sentences and the nonsense strings occurring in poetic discourse, and several suggestions have been made as to how grammatical statements might be framed to make explicit the meaning of deviant strings of this kind and their relationship with well-formed sentences (see Levin 1962, Thorne 1965, Fowler 1969). Interesting though much of this discussion is, it is important to see that it is concerned with a problem of the linguist's own invention. Sentences only exist as the linguist's exemplification of rules within a grammar; and they must by definition be well-formed. Semi-sentences cannot occur in a grammar because they are semi, and they cannot occur anywhere else because they are sentences. They are, in effect, figments of the linguist's imagination.

If we cannot account for the interpretation of discourse, deviant or otherwise, by invoking grammatical knowledge, then how can we account for it? We can account for it, I suggest, by invoking this concept of interpretative procedures. What the ethnomethodologists do when they attempt to explain the nature of these procedures is to focus attention on precisely what is involved in what Katz refers to as the 'use of grammatical knowledge'. There is no 'knowledge of another kind' apart from this and it is these procedures I suggest which are put into operation when we realize the communicative value of linguistic elements in discourse, whether this is poetic or not. In other words, I am suggesting that we interpret poetry in the same way as we interpret other kinds of discourse and that if we did not do so, there would be no way of explaining how poetry is interpreted at all. The difference between the interpretation of poetic and other kinds of discourse is not that we use different procedures, but that in the case of poetic discourse we are more conscious of them. Interpretation is more problematic and so we are inevitably more aware of the process involved. It is this which gives poetry its potential importance in language teaching.

Before going on to develop this last point, let me try to draw together what I have said so far. The kind of structurally graded course which presents grammatical and lexical material so that it appears in a precise step-by-step sequence clearly cannot incorporate poetry as it is commonly represented, that is to say as something linguistically complex which requires explanation, or something vague and aesthetic whose meaning can only be intuitively apprehended. However, a course of this kind, or of any other kind, cannot be said to teach language satisfactorily unless it can also provide learners with the ability to use their lin-

guistic knowledge to create or recreate discourse. The aim of all teaching must be to develop communicative strategies, or cognitive procedures, whereby the language user is able to recognize in a situation or a context just those conditions which operate to provide linguistic elements with their specific value, whether these elements are single lexical items or sentences or combinations of sentences. It is not enough simply to bring bits of language into association with contexts and situations, and leave the learner to work out for himself which contextual or situational features are relevant for the correct interpretation of the language as an instance of communication. A structurally based course, then, must somewhere make provision for the teaching of interpretative procedures, since not otherwise will learners be prepared for their encounter with actual discourse. The structural syllabus is based on the grammarian's orientation to language study and this does not provide a model of description that can deal adequately with discourse. The ethno-methodological orientation, for all the obscurity of its exposition, does provide such a model since it stresses the ongoing creative activity involved in deriving communicative value from linguistic elements as they occur in contexts of use. I suggest that the cognitive procedures that must be brought into operation in the interpretation of discourse containing elements which cannot be put into correspondence with well-formed sentences are the same as those we must employ to make sense of any discourse. The process whereby we interpret poetry is essentially the same process whereby we interpret any other kind of language use, the difference being that in poetic interpretation the process is inevitably more apparent.

Now if it is the case that an understanding of poetry, not as a piece of complex text or as a mysterious message but as a form of discourse, makes us conscious of the procedures we employ in the understanding of any discourse, and if it is the purpose of language courses to develop an awareness of such procedures, then it would seem logical to suppose that poetry can be introduced into such courses to help to develop such an awareness. It should be added that one must, at the same time, take care that the particular poems introduced are graded in terms of textual complexity and abstruseness of message.

Let us consider an example. Let us suppose that the following poem is judged to be appropriate from these points of view at a particular stage in a language course:

September

- 1 We sit late, watching the dark slowly unfold:
No clock counts this.
When kisses are repeated and the arms hold
There is no telling where time is.

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- 5 It is midsummer: the leaves hang big and still:
Behind the eye a star,
Under the silk of the wrist a sea, tell
Time is nowhere.
- We stand; leaves have not timed the summer.
- 10 No clock now needs
Tell we have only what we remember:
Minutes uproaring with our heads
- Like an unfortunate King's and his Queen's
When the senseless mob rules;
- 15 And quietly the trees casting their crowns
Into the pools.
- Ted Hughes*

We will assume that the learner knows the signification of the grammatical structures and of the lexical items which appear in this poem, or has access to a dictionary. The question is: knowing these things, what procedures must be brought to bear to make sense of expressions like *watching the dark slowly unfold* (line 1), *under the silk of the wrist* (line 7), and so on. Even if we assume that the learner has encountered the use of *dark* as a noun, he needs to link its occurrence here with the expression *We sit late* for him to recognize that here it is the darkness of night that is being referred to. And this darkness *unfolds*. This verb, we will assume, has previously been given a signification that associates it with object noun phrases which make reference to tangible substances of a pliant nature: sheets of linen or paper, for example. But here it is associated with something insubstantial. Clearly for the reader to make sense of this expression, then, he must recognize that the significations of *dark* and *unfold* are not carried unmodified into the context: he must realize a kind of mutual conditioning whereby each lexical item draws relevant semantic features from the other to create a unique concept. The dark is both insubstantial and substantial, and its unfolding is both perceived (like the unfolding of a blanket) and imagined (like the unfolding of a story).

Consider now the expression *under the silk of the wrist*. Here the value of *silk* derives from the way it is conditioned by the phrase in which it occurs. The reader is required to select certain semantic features (smoothness and softness, for example) and to disregard others as irrelevant in this instance of use. In other words, he has to employ interpretative procedures to work out in what respect *silk* and *wrist* can be conceptually related as the context requires them to be, bearing in mind that the signification of these items will provide no explicit semantic link.

In the cases we have considered so far, the interpretative procedures are prompted by the syntactic relations which hold between the lexical items concerned. These relations, like bearings drawn on a map, indicate where semantic associations are to be found. It often happens, however (particularly in poetry), that associations are not overtly indicated in this way and the reader then has to discover meanings without the help of an explicit syntactic map. Thus, the syntactic relations between *dark* and *unfold* direct the reader's attention to where his interpretative procedures are to be applied, but there are no such directions to guide the reader to a recognition of the link between this collocation and that of *star-tell* in lines 6-7. An interpretation of this poem requires the reader to free himself from a reliance on syntactic clues and to recognize how a number of collocations (*tell-time*, *tell-story*, *clock-time*, *time-late*, *time-minutes*, and so on) function in effect like the semantic features of a complex concept which represents the central theme of the poem as a whole.

Mention might also be made of the problem posed by lines 12-14. Here the reader has to realize a verbal value for the noun *uproar*, relate this verb not only with the noun phrase *minutes*, with which it is syntactically linked, but also with the noun phrase *the senseless mob*, with which it is not, thereby establishing a meaning relation between the two noun phrases not indicated by syntactic structure, and not sanctioned by their semantic significations. Apart from this, he has to work out the value of *heads* by recognizing how its meaning here is a function of its association with *uproar*, *unfortunate*, and *senseless mob*. And so on.

It is not my purpose to conduct a full scale stylistic analysis of this poem (interesting though this would be) but simply to point out the kind of procedure involved in arriving at an interpretation of it as discourse. The obvious lack of correspondence between what words mean as lexical elements of the language code, their signification, and what they are required to mean in the context, their value, obliges the reader to engage in what Garfinkel calls 'practical reasoning'. Furthermore, the problematic nature of the task draws the reader's attention to the procedures he must employ. Let me say again that it seems to me that these procedures can essentially be no different from those we employ in the understanding of any use of language, though in poetry more demands tend to be made of them (hence its importance). To take just one example, the kind of reasoning involved in deriving appropriate value in the case of the lexical items we have just considered would appear to be no different in kind from that required in recognizing the value of the item *commercial* in the following instance of use¹:

Pure metals are likely to resist corrosion better than metals containing impurities. Thus pure aluminium resists attack better than a commercial variety.

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I believe that if teachers can represent poetry as discourse, along the lines suggested above, they will be able to make learners aware of how they use their linguistic knowledge in the interpretation of poetry, and that this will help to develop in them precisely those cognitive procedures which they need in order to deal with discourse of any kind. Once it is accepted that the ultimate aim of a language teaching course is to develop the ability to create and recreate discourse from the resources of linguistic knowledge, and once it is accepted that poetry can be represented as a kind of discourse, in which these processes are particularly open to observation, then I think one can begin to see a way of reinstating poetry as an integrative element in language teaching.

Notes

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1 I am indebted to H. J. Nyssonen for this example.