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Teaching fiction in an EFL classroom: a semiotic approach

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Abstract:

“Difficult; inaccessible; boring; what is the interest;...” these are, however, the recurring views of the students, who undertake studies of English as a foreign language, about studying literature. What they expect, in reality, from their studies is mainly to learn an appropriate use and usage of language as a linguistic tool for communication. Besides, these negative feelings seem to be much bred by the current observations about the place given to literary studies. Indeed, a less privileged place is left to the latter since modern society gives greater importance to scientific and technological advances for what it expects from education is to provide jobs to its learners, namely to make them autonomous persons.

Still, this is also the purpose of literary studies but at another level. In fact, since the complexity of the literary text lies mainly in its literariness- or defining features- among which the mode(s) of manipulating language by writers and the multiple interpretations the literary text may arouse in the reader(s), learners have the possibility to consider the different embedded ways by which meaning(s) is(are) imparted; such an activity gives them the opportunity to identify the features of language in other contexts, not necessarily academic, and therefore makes them autonomous. This is because studying literature, on the other hand, teaches learners a literary methodology, viz. to read, to think, to analyse, and to write critically about works of fiction.

Indeed, a close reading, like semiotics or the science that studies signs, is an activity that presupposes a decoding of the linguistic units, and the complexities of the text as a whole, so as to reach what is conveyed beyond the surface message. As a matter of fact, a particular attention is paid to the choice of words. In this way, semiotics contributes to reading in general, and how to teach reading literary texts in particular, since it considers the signification or the relationship between the signifier and the signified of the linguistic units. The

competence acquired by learners in the field of literature can be beneficial in other instances, as when listening to a political discourse where they would have to delve underneath the actual message to extract the hidden ideology.

Thus, what we would like to attempt to evince in this paper, via a semiotic analysis of a short story, "The Sisters" from the collection Dubliners, written by James Joyce, is the merits of semiotics for the interpretation of literary discourse and for enhancing learners' literary competence, specifically thanks to A.J.Greimas's actantial model as well as R.Barthes's mythical signification or denotation versus connotation. Through Greimas's actantial model, which was proposed after V.Propp and Lévi-Strauss, characters become 'actants' since they are identified in terms of how they act or what they do, with the aim of extracting their relationships and thus their functions in the story. These 'actants', in any story or fictional world, have their experiences at some place and time. In "The Sisters", the descriptions of space and time seem to correlate with the actants' functions; and by an attempt to extract the connoted meaning, following Barthes's mythical signification, we could infer the actants' inner motives, and attain, as a result, the multiple concealed meanings of the story that underlie the author's rejection of the predominant ideology.

The goal of a semiotic approach is, then, to describe the conditions of literary signification along Saussure's model of linguistic signification, namely the relationship between what is implied in contrast to what is apparent. As Silverman states: "literature is a prime example of a second order signifying system since it builds upon language".

Résumé :

"Difficult, inaccessible; boring; what is the interest..." these, are, however, the recurring views of most students, who undertake studies of English as a foreign language, about studying literature. What they expect, in reality, from their studies is mainly to learn an appropriate use and usage of language as a linguistic tool for communication. Besides, these negative feelings seem to be much bred by the current observations about the place given to literary studies. Indeed, a less privileged place is left to the latter since modern society gives greater

importance to scientific and technological advances for what it expects from education is to provide jobs to its learners, namely to make them autonomous persons.

Still, this is also the purpose of literary studies but at another level. In fact, since the complexity of the literary text lies mainly in its literariness- or defining features as Jakobson says- among which the mode(s) of manipulating language by writers and the multiple interpretations the literary text may arouse in the reader(s), learners have the possibility to consider the different embedded ways by which meaning(s) is(are) imparted; such an activity gives them the opportunity to identify the features of language in other contexts, not necessarily academic, and therefore makes them autonomous. This is because studying literature, on the other hand, teaches learners a literary methodology, viz. to read, to think, to analyse, and to write critically about works of fiction.

This is what we would like to attempt to evince in this paper, via a semiotic analysis of a short story, 'The Sisters' from the collection Dubliners, written by James Joyce. To find the story's theme, we propose R. Barthes's mythical signification or denotation versus connotation. Thus, we would like to see the merits of semiotics in the teaching of literature and for enhancing learners' literary competence. But before that, we should clarify, first, what the teaching of literature and literary competence imply.

I. Linguistic versus Literary Competence

Literary competence (Hasan, 1989: 104) is a notion introduced by Culler in 1975 by analogy with Chomsky's 'linguistic competence' that was first coined in 1965¹. Chomsky's reference to an average linguistic competence- that consists mainly of the ability to produce and understand 'syntactically acceptable sentences' underlying, therefore, types of competence in other aspects of language such as the stylistic, the connotative, and so on- is also true of literary competence. In other words, this competence is a 'partial' one that can be subdivided into different

¹ According to Di Girolamo (1981:85), 'literary competence' is a notion that was put forward by the formalists in the sense of a 'competence of a grammar of deviations'. The first to have defined it in this sense was Beirwisch (1965), and it was adopted by others, though sometimes with little discrepant meanings, such as Ihwe (1970), Van dijk (1972 b), Corti (1976) etc.

competences, as many as the available institutional literary genres, styles, forms of expression (verse, prose, ...etc.) and so forth. On the other hand, literary competence differs from other kinds of competence in that it comprises two discrepant capacities, that of producing literary works, and that of understanding them (Di Girolamo, 1981: 85-90). It is, of course, this second sense that concerns or interests us.

According to Hasan (1989: 104-5) the acquisition of a literary competence is reached thanks to the fruitful exposure to studies of literature as a consequence of explicit methods of such inquiry, which will result into the ability to study literature (author's emphasis). But before considering these explicit methods that Hasan suggests, one cannot deny that, in the case of teaching literature in an EFL classroom, having a certain linguistic competence has a pivotal role to play since it can enhance learners' comprehension of a literary work while engaging with its linguistic units. This is because the way writers use language to create a world of fiction is what makes it an artistic work in contrast to the ordinary use of language².

This means that a literary text is not only about content but above all about form. Indeed, Jakobson (1960) defines the poetic function as being an orientation to the form of the message itself (Widdowson, 1987: 242). The important role of form consists of determining the structure and the kind of response fictional texts evoke since one has always to refer content back to the concepts which manifest it (Steirle, 1980: 103). So, reading literature differs from ordinary reading; and an important aim of teaching literature is to make learners' acquire a literary competence that comprises an ability to understand above all how the language of literature means not simply *what* it means.

² Here, the reference is made to the formalists' opposition between the practical and the aesthetic function of language, which reflects the opposition between the standard and the literary language (Di Girolamo, 1981: 21). Slavic formalism, in fact, defines literary language in terms of deviation, or 'écart' to use Valéry's expression, from standard language (ibidem: 15).

II. Reading Literature

As advanced above, the primary concern of teaching literature is the acquisition of a certain literary competence particularly in the field of reading, namely reading interpretively or critically, as Johnson remarks (1985: 140): “Teaching literature is teaching how to read ... how to read what the language is doing, not guess what the author was thinking.” She adds that what is ‘inside’ the text is not necessarily understood unless reference to ‘outside’ discourses such as philology, history, biography, and so forth is made. She also stresses that the relevance and authority of these external and internal resources should be evaluated or tested since this is what training in reading must be as well (ibidem: 148).

On the other hand, reading literature should not be seen solely as reading for information or for the isolation of facts that reveal content or the author’s message as provided by the teacher. This is, unfortunately, what most learners think the study of literature is about. As a result, they do not attempt to make their own interpretations by looking at the way language is used by writers to carry the different imbedded meanings. This means that there is a distinction between private reading or reading for pleasure and reading for academic purposes in the study of literature. For the former, a sufficient knowledge of language is needed. For the latter, to understand means necessarily scrutiny (Hasan, 1989: 103). This implies, therefore, that as teachers we should be primarily concerned with providing learners ways of considering the use of language in literary works so as to make them autonomous readers who would be capable of providing their own interpretations and of revealing the content by themselves instead of waiting for the teacher’s own interpretation of the work which is to be regurgitated during an examination. This is because teaching, as Widdowson (1985: 184) claims, is a means of promoting learning, namely to develop proficiency as a pedagogic objective. In the context of teaching literature, the pedagogic objective is to make students know how to (do

something) read, or to develop in them the capacity of interpreting literature as a use of language, which is a precondition of studying it (ibid.: 194).

In short, the study of literature presupposes particular processes of reading in order to interpret the texts via a close scrutiny of the linguistic units. To interpret implies criticism, which means that there should be resort to literary theory and literary criticism. These go hand in hand for the basis of practical criticism is literary theory, and the absence of a work of art entails the non-existence of the activity of criticism. In this activity, basic questions concerning the philosophical, psychological, functional, and descriptive nature of a text are asked (Bressler, 1994: 3). Furthermore, it is only a clear, well-defined, and logical theory that will help readers to develop a method through which “they can establish principles that enable them to justify, order, and clarify their own appraisals of a text in a consistent manner” (ibidem: 4). In this light, semiotics, the science that studies signs, can be viewed as a helpful method for readers since it is a science concerned with identifying the conventions and operations via which literature, as a signifying practice, makes its apparent effects of meaning (Culler, 1981: 48).

III. Semiotics and the Teaching of Literature

In the foregoing lines, we stated that achieving a literary competence, according to Hasan, is done thanks to the fruitful exposures to studies of literature by means of ‘explicit’ methods. As a matter of fact, we would like to show how a semiotic study of Joyce’s ‘The Sisters’ can be viewed as an explicit method to use for any narrative fiction. Indeed, Semiotics, as a branch that studies signs and their significations, has much contributed to the study of “the most complex of sign systems [which is] literature” because of the free work of implicit complexities of signifying processes as well as the indeterminacy of meaning in literary

works (Culler, 1981: 35). What a semiotics of literature attempts to discover is the conventions behind meaning construction.

Indeed, Hasan (1989: 98) observes that: “The art of verbal art consists of the use of language in such a way that this second order semiosis becomes possible”, i.e., an important feature of a literary work is the ability of its language to carry two levels of meanings; to arrive at this second level is what makes this work an artistic creation. To reach that second level, one should find in the text the significant contrast or what is known as foregrounding, which is going to lead to the construction of hypotheses about second-order semiosis (ibidem: 104).

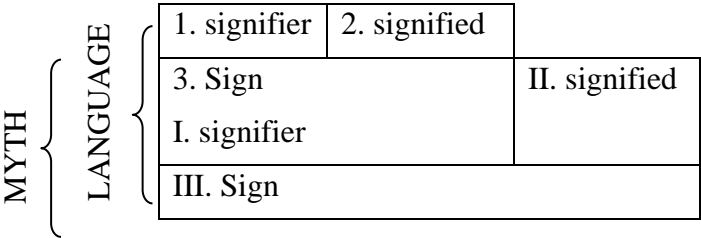
1. Symbolic Articulation versus Barthes’s Mythical Signification

Hasan (1989: 99) states that: “one of the reasons that verbal art can never be dissociated from the community in which it was created is precisely because the stratum of theme is closest to a community’s ideology.” Barthes’s ideology or “myth”, which is the complex system of images and beliefs constructed by a society so as to sustain and validate its own being, functions as a second-order semiotic

system. Myth operates by taking a previously established sign the total association of signifier with signified- which is full of signification, and “draining” it until it becomes an “empty” signifier that should be called the form, to which a signified is added, and that should be called the concept (Barthes quoted by Hawkes, 1977: 131)³.

³ It should be reminded here that before Barthes, it is the Danish Louis Hjelmslev who was the first to propose an approach to language as well as to the study of symbolic systems or semiology that he called “Glossematics”. He converted Saussure’s distinction between Form and Substance into a theory of Expression Plane versus Content Plane. The Expression Plane is but the outer appearance or expression of language (phonetics, phonology, and lexicology), that is sound, whereas the Content Plane is the world of thought manifested or conveyed in language or where meaning lies. Louis Hjelmslev, who stated that the study of literary fact should be one of the aims of a linguistic theory (Di Girolimo, 1981:3), formulated the model with which Barthes works in Mythologies in the following way: “...it seems appropriate to view connotators

In *Mythologies*, Barthes defines ideology as being the condition of false consciousness. This definition presumes, then, the existence of a reality outside ideology “to which we would have direct access were it not for the ruling class” (Silverman, 1983: 30) or the group who exercise power. Thus, Barthes’s secondary or mythical signification, which is the association of form and content, is shown in the diagram below:



For him, the process of signification traditionally termed as “denotation” and “connotation” works in the same way. That is, the signifiers of connotation- which is the use of language to mean something other than what is said- are made up of the signs of the denoted system- the system of the primary meaning (Hawkes, 1977: 132-3); and a central characteristic of the “literary” or “aesthetic” use of language is connotation. So, literature is like connotation a “second-order signifying system” superimposed upon the “first-order” or system of language (ibidem: 134).

2. The Ideology of the ‘The Sisters’

Following Hasan’s suggestion, the significant contrast found in ‘The Sisters’ is implied in the presentation of the main characters of the story, namely the anonymous boy, and the priest Father Flynn. Indeed, one is old (‘the old chap’, ‘Father Flynn...aged sixty-five’ and the figurative images ‘ancient priestly garments

as content for which the denotative semiotics are expression, and to designate this content and expression as a semiotic” (Silverman, 1983: 26). The discrepancy, however, between Hjemslev’s model and Barthes’s appropriation of that model lies in the way by which Barthes complicates it when he identifies connotation with the operation of ideology or ‘myth’.

[and] their green faded look') (our emphasis), and the other is young ('the boy', 'the youngster', 'a child'.)

On the other hand, it seems that the descriptions of space and time in the story are interrelated, and that they correlate with the main characters' movements. In fact, there is a kind of divergence in the boy's movements, namely from dark, closed spaces to open, lighted ones and back again to the dark closed spaces. The open and light spaces connote freedom and hope respectively; whereas the dark and closed spaces have the opposite connotation. It is only in the open space, which connotes freedom, that the boy could remember the dream, "the disguised representation of a repressed wish" (Jackson, 2000: 62). It is the boy's wish for freedom, which, through a method of amplification, becomes the Irish people's wish for freedom.

As far as space and time in relation to the priest's movements are concerned, one notices an almost static description. The priest is, in fact, always depicted in obscure and closed spaces. His room and even the smallest details suggested in such objects in the room such as the packet, the black snuff-box, and even the coffin and the confession-box in the Church connote closure and obscurity. All these signify a lack of movement due to 'the paralysis', a word mentioned in the first lines of the story. This paralysis is explicitly mentioned in the priest's physical arrest through the description of both his postures and gestures ('sitting in his arm-chair', 'his hands trembled too much', 'his stupefied doze'). But it is also expressed, implicitly, via a hyperbolic use of stative verbs that describe unconscious processes of cognition or perception ('I thought', 'I knew', 'I saw', 'I understood', 'I remembered'); syntactically, these verbs resist progression; they may connote, as a result, a lack of movement. To know the kind of paralysis the author deals to in reality, one needs a historical account of the context in which the story was written.

In the story, there is reference to the date 1895. Though it denotes the date of the priest's death, it connotes, however, a historical time as well. Indeed, the year 1895 is a landmark in Irish history, and more precisely on Irish political scene. That year witnessed the victory of the Conservatives and their allied Liberal Unionists. Consequently, it was no more a question of a Home Rule.

The chief goal of that Home Rule movement had been an autonomous Ireland, at least in internal affairs, so as to obtain independence from the United Kingdom. Unfortunately, that nationalist movement split because of its leader's divorce, Parnell, in 1890. A divorce strongly prohibited by the Catholic Church. As a result, the movement lost its weigh ending thus with its defeat in the 1895 elections (Guiffan, 1989: 65-67). The result was then a total state of disillusion, of "confusion" and of paralysis among Irish people. Thus, the priest's death connotes the death of the Irish people's hope or wish for an independent Ireland. This constitutes, in fact, Joyce's strong rejection of the predominant ideology in his country at that time. As he states:

My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country and I chose Dublin for the scene because the city seemed to me to be the centre of paralysis (Stewart, 1957: 11).

Conclusion

To develop in learners a capacity of reading interpretively by moving beyond initial meaning and an ability of taking a critical stance is the goal of teaching literature given the host possibilities of interpretations a literary work can offer. With the aid of the different available literary theories and approaches, such as the semiotic

approach, learners would have the opportunity to develop a critical mind while engaging with the features of literary texts that always offer levels of meanings. The goal of a semiotic approach

is, in fact, to describe the conditions of literary signification along Saussure's model of linguistic signification, namely the relationship between what is implied in contrast to what is apparent. As Silverman

(1983: 26) states: "literature is a prime example of a second order signifying system since it builds upon language".

The benefit of studying literature is that it teaches learners how to analyze and write critically about works of fiction. In foreign language learning, teaching literature has the educational value of promoting an understanding of the nature and use of language in other instances, not necessarily academic, as in an advertisement or in newspaper pages. The competence acquired in the field of literature can also be beneficial while listening to a political discourse where learners would have to delve underneath the actual message in order to extract the hidden ideology.

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