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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF POETRY

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It will generally be accepted, whatever one's pedagogic persuasion, that the business of language teaching is to develop in learners the ability to use language, to put linguistic forms to the service of meaning. My purpose in this paper is to argue that literature, and in particular poetry, has characteristics as a use of language which make it especially well qualified to assist in this enterprise. Its interpretation, I shall argue, (as I have elsewhere, e.g. Widdowson 1979, 1984, 1986) naturally engages procedures for the realization of communicative significance immanent in linguistic forms. These realising procedures being activities central to the process of language learning.

We may agree with Halliday that learning a language, the first or second, is a matter of learning how to mean (Halliday 1975) but the concept of meaning is itself a slippery one. There are, broadly speaking, two ways of conceiving the matter. One way is to consider how language itself means as a formal system, and the other is to consider how people mean in the act of using this system as a resource. The first way is semantic: its concern is with abstraction, with the general signifying properties of words and sentences in isolation from content. The second way is pragmatic: its concern is with actuality, with what people intend

and interpret in the use of particular expressions in context. It is the second way that has the greater current appeal in the study and teaching of language. The first has fallen somewhat out of favour.

One way of demonstrating the difference between these two modes of meaning is to refer to notions of entailment and implicature.

Consider, for example, the following exchange:

A: How many children do you have?

B: We have two daughters.

Now I will naturally understand B as meaning that she has only two children and that both of them are girls. This is a pragmatic interpretation of the utterance. A is assuming that the normal conditions for communication are in force on this occasion and that, according to the social contract known as the co-operative principle (Grice 1975) B is providing all the information relevant to A's question so that by *implication* she is saying that she has only two children, and that she has no sons.

But if we consider the matter semantically, this interpretation has no warrant. The sentence, as distinct from the utterance;

We have two daughters

does not entail the proposition;

We have two children *only*

but:

We have two children *at least*

The general *entailment* of the expression in isolation as a sentence does not match the par-

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ticular ;mpZytcciZsCo n of the expression as an utterance in context. If, later in the conversation, it were to emerge that B actually had five children (three sons, let us suppose, as well as two daughters) then A would quite naturally feel that she had been deceived. But B could claim that she had not actually *said* that she had only two children, so she was not guilty of an untruth ("If you choose to draw your own conclusions from what I say, tihen that's your affair..."). But B is nevertheless guilty of a deception by applying the analytic semantic principle of entailment rather than the appropriate pragmatic principle of implication.

The central point, then, is that people do not (unless they wish to be perverse for some reason) engage in semantic analysis when they communicate with each other. They rely on the principle of relevance (see Wilson and Sperber, 1981, Sperber and Wilson, 1986). They suppose that what they actually say, the linguistic tokens they produce, will be interpreted by means of a mutual agreement to co-operate in the achievement of pragmatic implication. The language sign is taken as an index or indication which points away from itself in the direction of shared knowledge and assumptions and not as a self-sufficient symbol which contains its own meaning. In a sense, therefore, effective communication calls for a deflection of attention away from language itself.

The two approaches to the description of meaning that I have roughly outlined correspond quite closely to the two approaches to the teaching of language which have been in contention over recent years: the "structuralist" and the "communicative". The structuralist approach focuses on semantic meaning which is incorporated within form, and signified by words and sentences. The communicative approach

focuses on pragmatic meaning, the meaning which is achieved by use, negotiated as a function of the relevant indexical connection between language and context. The difference between these approaches has sometimes been characterised in terms of the structuralist focus on form as against the communicative focus on meaning. But this is misleading. The structuralist approach is just as preoccupied with meaning as the communicative. The difference lies in the kind of meaning with which each has been centrally concerned: semantic on the one hand, pragmatic on the other.

The basic assumption of the structuralist approach is that once the semantic meaning inherent in linguistic form is grasped by the learner, then the ability to achieve pragmatic meaning in contexts of actual use will follow as a corollary, a necessary consequence. This is challenged by those of the communicative persuasion. They assume, on the contrary, that a knowledge of the semantic resources of language forms will be acquired contingently as a consequence of communicative activities which call for the achievement of pragmatic meaning.

Apart from the evidence from practical pedagogic experience, the very nature of these modes of meaning suggests that such transference in second language learning, in either direction, is problematic for learners. A focus on the semantic properties of linguistic forms encourages the concept of meaning as invariant entailment and discourages the practice of inferring implication from context. An exclusive concern with pragmatic meaning, on the other hand, encourages a disregard of language and encourages a dependence on the intralinguistic clues available in the context. Thus learners are exposed to the risk of on the one hand internalising a competence they cannot act

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upon in communicative performance, and on the other of acquiring a limited facility in performance without this providing for the effective development of a more general competence.

All of this would seem to suggest that we should seek to include in our teaching some activities which combine these modes of meaning, in which the use of language calls for close attention to the language used, where the realistic communicative import depends on a focus on formal semantic meaning; in other words, where the conditions for entailment and implication are reconciled. Such activity would bring home to learners the necessary interdependence of structure and communication, too often represented in current thinking as in pedagogic opposition.

One such activity, I suggest is the interpretation of poems. Poems are, it will be acknowledged, instances of communicative uses of language. At the same time, they appear in dissociation from context as self-enclosed utterances, and in their, deliberate contrivance, direct attention to features of form. In these respects, though they are communicative in intent and invoke the principle of relevance, they resemble sentences, and their interpretation depends on the close scrutiny of form we would not customarily apply to language in use.

I want now to explore how poetic interpretation depends on this realization of communicative features inherent in form by considering a simple little poem by Emily Dickinson

A word is dead  
When it is said,  
Some say.

I say it just  
Begins to live  
That day.

Let us suppose that these statements, transposed into conventional prosaic terms, were offered as a contribution to a conversation.

Some people say that once a word is said it is dead, but I say that is only then that it begins to live.

The other participant ( s ) in the conversation would naturally seek to relate such a remark to what had preceded in the interaction, assuming that it was intended to be relevant to the topic underway. If such relevance were not apparent, if the comment could not be incorporated into the context, and no indication were forthcoming as to why it was said, then some explanation would be called for.

Why do you say that?

What do you mean?

Pardon?

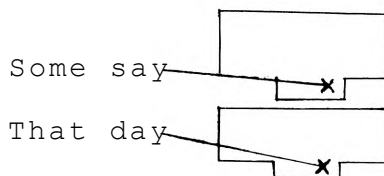
As a remark coming out of the blue it would have little point, and make little sense.

But in the form of poem it does come out of the blue. There is no preceding context and no subsequent explanation. The significance of what is said has to be inferred somehow from the expression itself, dissociated from context. The remark is presented to us as self-evidently and self-sufficiently remarkable on its own in isolation. The problem for interpretation is to discover what it is that makes the remark significant in the absence of conditions which conventionally attend the inference of pragmatic meaning in communication.

Since no contextual connections are possible, the only clues to significance must be contained within the language of the poem, inherent in

those features of form which do not carry over into the conventional prose paraphrase. We are drawn into a consideration of what the verbal patterning itself might signify.

The poem is syntactically and prosodically in two parts, delimited by the two expressions *Some say* / *That day*. These are equivalent in several ways: they have the same syllabic structure, rhyme and the second syllable, appear in the same place in the verse form, and complete the syntax of the sentence in each case. These expressions can be seen as the main structural elements which give the poem its shape. We might represent this as follows:



There is, then, (we might suggest) a simple symmetry in the shape of the poem, consistent perhaps with the simple, not to say commonplace, comment that is being made. But when we consider the syntax of each of the sentences contained within each part, and the way it fits into the metrical scheme, we find that this first impression of simplicity cannot be sustained.

Consider first Verse 1. Here the end of each line, with its juncture of pause and silent stress, coincides neatly with syntactic closure. Thus, the first line, a complete metrical unit, constitutes a sentence, a complete syntactic and semantic unit, so that it projects no grammatical expectation. The lines that follow are both adjuncts, optional elements as far as syntactic structure is concerned. Their pragmatic function is to reduce the force of the opening line by successive qualifications.

|                  |                  |       |
|------------------|------------------|-------|
| A word is dead   | A word is dead   | } ] } |
| When it is said, | When it is said, | ] } ] |
| Some say.        | Some say.        | ]     |

The syntactic and metrical completeness of each of the first two lines is further reinforced by the occurrence of the single syllable masculine rhyming words *dead* and *said* which bring the lines to an abrupt close. The patterning here is sharply defined and seems to give the effect of decisive assertion: 'A word is dead when it is said, and that's that!' And yet this effect is weakened somewhat by the qualification expressed in line two and quite undermined by line three which qualifies everything said so far by shifting it into reported speech, thereby introducing a note of non-commitment: 'A word is dead when it is said, so they say'. This impression of lack of commitment is reinforced by the indefinite pronoun *some*, and the unmarked form of the verb, *say*, in contrast with the positive marked version of the verb, *4a-td*, in the preceding line.

We begin, then, with what a reader takes to be a direct and absolute assertion, which is subsequently neutralized by being recast in reported speech in the last line. In this way the reader is drawn into the very process of sceptical qualification. There here would have been no such experiential engagement if the proposition had been given a different syntactic ordering, if this verse had, for example, appeared as:

Some say  
A word is dead  
When it is said.



So the first verse of the poem ends with a phrase which undoes the force of the first stark assertion by putting it into reported speech. The second verse of the poem is also in reported speech. But this time it is signalled right at the beginning by a phrase which is not a qualification but an assertion. The assertion is, furthermore, strengthened by the stress which naturally falls on pronoun *I* by contrast with the immediately preceding phrase:

Some, say  
 ┌───────────┐  
 I say...

The two expressions are structurally equivalent, both signal reported speech, both have the same form of the same lexical verb, but in all other respects they are in opposition. *Some, say* has an indefinite pronoun as subject, comes at the end of the sentence, qualifies what has preceded, and indicates the withdrawal of speaker commitment to the proposition. *I say* has a definite pronoun as subject, comes at the beginning of the sentence, serves as an assertion and indicates, indeed emphasises by contrastive stress the speaker's commitment to the proposition that follows, without qualification and contained within an unmarked work order. The effect of the placement of this phrase in the poem can be appreciated by comparing these lines with an alternative version:

It just begins  
 To live that day,  
 I say.

Within the simple symmetrical shape of the two parts of the poem, then we find quite complex contrasts, a sort of secondary articulation of attitude. *Some, say* relates to *that day* to make a symmetry, but *I say* intervenes contrastively

to disrupt it. The first assertion is reduced to insignificance to be forcefully superceded by the second. We are left in no doubt as to which view of the word is to prevail. The authority of the first person is directly represented in the verbal arrangement. This becomes clear when we consider alternative formulations of the propositions which are expressed:

Some say  
A word is dead  
When it is said.

I say  
It just begins  
To live that day.

A word is dead  
When it is said,  
Some say.

It just begins  
To live that day ,  
I say.

But what of the propositions themselves. So far we have been considering how their syntactic realization suggests attitude, how it represents a kind of modality or affective conditioning. But the ideational content of these propositions is also enhanced by the way they have been verbally fashioned. Notice that the predicate in the first line is stative: 'A word is dead'. That in the second line might be interpreted as a passive, but its parallel syntactic position and its phonological and metrical equivalence gives it stative force in association with the preceding line. A word is dead = a word is said. The two lines indicate stasis, absence of movement. They do not only express the proposition "a word is dead when it is said", they actually represent, in the syntax, the identical state of deadness and saidness.

In the second part of the poem however, the verb in the predicate is dynamic, being active in voice and inceptive in aspect, so that the expression 'begins to live' can be said to both refer to birth and at the same time represent it. This effect is furthermore enhanced by the simple and uninterrupted continuity of the syntactic pattern which carries the reader over line boundaries as if impelled by the elemental life force itself.

The sense of the finality, the abrupt closure of death in Part 1 of the poem and the contrasting active and initiating movement of living in Part 2 are conveyed, then, by syntactic and propositions, by virtue of lexical meaning, but also as they are represented in the form. What is said *about*, words becomes indistinguishable from what is done *with* them. Their death is denied in their very expression: words come alive when they are said, as is evident from the interpretations they provoke. The poem is thus complex in its simplicity, continual in its very closure: a profound statement of the commonplace. Outside the ordinary contexts of communication, paradoxes become possible, oppositions are reconciled, in a reality whose significance does not depend on conditions of relevance.

To return, then, to the point which the analysis of this poem was meant to illustrate. In the interpretation of poetry, there is a necessary interdependence between the understanding of formal structure and the recognition of a communicate effect. Meaning is a function of a focus on form. And an increased perceptive of the subtleties of poetic representation, necessarily entails an increased awareness of the signifying potential of grammar.

Poetry and grammar have by tradition

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been seen as poles apart and in opposition. What I have tried to show is that they can combine in partnership, and that such partnership supports the principles of communicative teaching without, as has so often been the case, denying the essential role of a formal knowledge of language.

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