Semiotics in Language Education

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2

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by
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Preface

Students in high school, college, and university classrooms throughout the world customarily characterize their attempts to learn a new language as a monumental struggle, especially when they compare their efforts to how easily and *naturally* they were able to acquire their native language during infancy and childhood. Throughout the twentieth century, the question of why it is so difficult to master a *second language* in a classroom environment came to constitute a central preoccupation of language educators throughout the globe. Is there anything, they would constantly ask, that can be done *in the classroom* to make language learning less of a struggle, and more comparable to how the native language is acquired? Attempts to answer this question led to the founding of the discipline of *applied (educational) linguistics* which, during the last quarter of the century, developed into two branches known generally as *second language acquisition research* and *second language teaching methodology*.

The normal plan for resolving the problem of how to impart native-like fluency in the classroom was a relatively simple one; it consisted, basically, in extracting pedagogical principles from the scientific research on both *language* by linguists and on the *learner* by psychologists. These were then used to devise pedagogical practices and instructional materials that teachers were expected to adapt to their specific situations. The underlying assumption was that the degree of success of language learning was proportional to the degree to which the practices and materials were compatible with the prevailing linguistic and psychological theories, *regardless of who was doing the teaching*. But after a century of such practices, surveys continue to show that only a small fraction of all language students exposed to structured classroom instruction eventually achieve native-like proficiency. The vast majority of students, it would seem, are probably going to have to be content with learning approximations of the language, *no matter how they are taught it*.

As a teacher of Italian as a second language for over a quarter of a century, I too have been annoyed constantly by the many persistent difficulties that the classroom learning situation entails. As an instructor of semiotics during the same period of time, I started wondering a decade ago if the challenges posed by classroom language learning could be studied profitably from the particular perspective of semiotic theory. Thus, I embarked on a series of research projects whose results impressed upon me how powerful semiotics is as a framework for investigating classroom language behavior. I also found, to my surprise, that although much has been written on the education-semiotics interface, very little has been published on the relevance of semiotics to second language teaching. Hence, the reason for this book. I have written it as an introductory text for teachers, educators, applied linguists, and anyone else interested in the contribution that semiotics can make to language education. Even though the term *language education* will be used ordinarily in reference to *second language education* in classroom contexts, I believe that the ideas discussed in this book are applicable to language education generally (e.g. to bilingual models of education, to immersion education, etc.).

The opening chapter provides a brief historical analysis of the main trends in second language education in the twentieth century; the second introduces the notion of *network theory* and the semiotic principles upon which it is based; the third, fourth, and fifth chapters then deal respectively with *denotative, connotative,* and *metaphorical concepts*. Network theory is drafted to provide a framework for discussing student discourse in comparison with target culture discourse. It is based on the idea that concepts form associative connections based on sense and on inference.

I must warn readers from the outset about what not to expect from this book. First, they will not find in it an in-depth treatment of semiotics proper. Relevant works for further consultation in semiotic theory are listed in the bibliography at the back, which contains not only cited works, but also useful ones dealing with both semiotics and second language education. Second, they will not find a critical discussion of the purported advantages of one approach over another (e.g. a Saussurean vs. a Peircean approach to the sign). Finally, readers should also not expect to find a prescription of how to impart native-like fluency in a language to classroom language learners. Semiotics is useful only in providing helpful *insights*, not overarching *solutions* in education. I will, however, discuss in some detail the implications that network theory has for language pedagogy. Whether readers agree or disagree with any or all of my comments, it is my sincere hope that they will be stimulated by this book to know more about the semiotics-language education interface. That and that alone will have made the writing of this book worthwhile.

I would like to thank, above anyone else, my students at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, and University of Lugano. Their critical responses to my teaching, along with the many enthusiastic classroom discussions I have had with them over the years, have encouraged me to write this manual for a broader audience. A special debt of gratitude goes out to Professors Thomas A. Sebeok and Jean Umiker-Sebeok of Indiana University for the unwavering support they have always given to my ideas, and for inviting me to synthesize them in book form.

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Chapter I
Language teaching and semiotics

1. Introductory remarks

The great Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978: 51) once remarked that the "very essence of memory is that human beings actively remember with the help of signs". In these words can be detected a plea for establishing a connection between *semiotics*, "the science studying signs and sign systems", *learning theory* "the science investigating how signs are learned and remembered", and *education*, "the instructional practices employed to teach individuals how to control signs". Although important research on this connection has been conducted by semioticians throughout the twentieth century, rarely has Vygotsky's entreaty shaped the development of "mainstream" educational practices. Before considering what Vygotsky's plea would entail in the area of *second language* (SL) education, it is useful to take a brief look first at how SL educational practices evolved in the twentieth century. This will provide a backdrop to the discussion that will follow in the subsequent chapters of this book.

The term *second language learning* (SLL) refers to the learning of a language after the *first* or *native language* (NL). The latter process is referred to generally as *first* or *native language acquisition* (NLA). The term *acquisition*, rather than *learning*, is used to indicate that the NL process unfolds in a largely unconscious manner. Analogously, the term *second language acquisition* (SLA) has been coined to distinguish between unconscious and conscious processes in second language learning. This distinction will be used in this book only whenever it is relevant. Incidentally, the NL is often symbolized as L_1 and the SL as L_2 in the relevant pedagogical literature—a convention that will not be adopted here. *Second language teaching* (SLT) is used to refer to any form or manifestation of instructional behavior involving SLs. SLT may be a *private* concern (one teacher-for-one learner), as it is, for instance, in so-called *Berlitz* schools, or a *class-*

room-based process, as it is in high school, college, or university settings. Only the latter meaning will be intended in this book when the term SLT is used.

1.1 Language education in the twentieth century

Around the year 1880, a radical new view of language education emerged that spread quickly among teachers and educators. Motivated by the premise that effective classroom instruction should be carried out according to psychologically-valid principles of learning, it emerged in reaction to the prevailing eighteenth and nineteenth century practice known as *grammar-translation* pedagogy. The latter was so called because its identifying instructional characteristic was the presentation of grammatical information about the SL that learners were expected to assimilate on their own and then apply as best they could to translation tasks. The new perspective led to the crystallization of a grass-roots movement among teachers and educators, known as the *reform movement*. The premise that inspired the movement became such an entrenched one in the minds of teachers throughout the twentieth century—even today it is virtually impossible to think of SLT as anything but a scientifically-designed form of instruction grounded in some psychologically-testable theory of learning.

One of the primary goals of the early reformers was to systematize pedagogical practices on the basis of sound psychological theories of SLA. This led to the development of the *method notion* in SLT, i.e. to the idea that SLA could be nurtured successfully in classroom settings only if instruction was conducted *methodically* according to a psychologically-based "plan of attack". It was thought that this could be realized only with standardized instructional techniques and pedagogical resources designed specifically for the teacher to carry out the plan as practically and effectively as possible.

1.1.1 The direct method

The grammar-translation approach traces its roots to the medieval and early Renaissance periods, when only Latin and Greek were deemed worthy of formal study in European schools. The learning of vernacular languages was tied to a practical need, and was assumed to be best accomplished through direct contact with the native speakers of those languages. This "social immersion" perspective of language learning, which McArthur (1983: 94) characterizes as the "marketplace" view of SLA, is actually the oldest learning theory in history, espoused by such ancient peoples as the Sumerians and the Babylonians (Titone 1968).

Latin was taught in a straightforward *deductive* way: teachers first presented a rule of grammar, after which they assigned oral and written translation tasks to students to test their ability to apply the rule. As the social and educational functions of Latin came to be assumed more and more by *vernacular* languages in the sixteenth century (from Latin *vernaculus* 'domestic, native'), the formal study of these languages started to take on increasing educational importance. From the outset, it was assumed that the teaching of vernacular languages was to be carried out with the same basic grammar-translation procedure that was used to teach the Classical languages (Titone 1968; Kelly 1969). Discovering that this approach was largely ineffectual when employed to teach communication skills in the vernacular languages, a group of educators proposed introducing some of the flavor of the "marketplace approach" into the classroom. Prominent among them were Guarino Guarini (1374-1460), St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), and Wolfgang Ratke (1571-1635), all of whom stressed the need for the grammar of the new language to be learned through induction, rather than rule-application to translation texts. After all, they argued, that is how children learned to speak and how the ability to communicate is acquired in the marketplace. In the seventeenth century, Jan Komensky, the Protestant bishop of Moravia, better known by his Latin name Comenius (1592-1670), also emphasized induction-oriented pedagogy, rather than grammar-translation. Comenius developed the technique of *situational dialoguing* so that students could induce the appropriate forms of language before they were taught explicitly to them.

Despite the efforts of such radical educators, the grammar-translation view of teaching vernacular languages prevailed right up to the late nineteenth century. Like Guarini, St. Ignatius, Ratke, and Comenius before them, the early reformers saw inductive learning as the *natural* mode of SLA. To this effect, they proposed transforming classroom instruction into a methodical approach that simulated the inductive processes guiding NLA. The linguist Henry Sweet (1899), for instance, made the explicit claim that SLT should be conceived as a pre-planned set of routines based on a scientific analysis of the target language and on a study of developmental psychology. In this way, he suggested, it would be possible for the SL teacher to select what was to be taught in a more effective manner, to know better what the limits of learning were, and to be in a better position to arrange the items to be taught in a coherent and psychologically-meaningful way.

Without delving into the complex socio-historical factors that converged at the turn of the century to install the method notion into the mindset of language educators, suffice it to say here that it coincided with four crucial events: (1) the emergence of linguistics as a science and, therefore, of a new focus on language as system; (2) the publication of the first psychological findings on how languages were purportedly learned and on how these can be employed to pedagogical advantage (Gouin 1880; Viëtor 1886; Sweet 1899; Jespersen 1904); (3) the foundation of the Modern Language Association of America in 1883 and of the Modern Language Association of Great Britain in 1889, both of which focused attention on the importance of the teaching process itself; and (4) the establishment of the International Phonetic Association in 1886, which drew awareness to the importance of accurate speech in language learning. The convergence of these events led to the rejection of grammar-translation practices in SLT and to the elaboration of the first modern inductive teaching method, called the *direct method*, which attained instant official recognition in France and Germany despite misgivings expressed by certain educators, and which was widely adopted in England and the United States.

The direct method came with its own teaching *syllabus*—a sequentially-organized compendium of structures that the instructor was to teach in the given succession—and textbook containing dialogues and pattern practice materials as the basis for classroom instruction (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 7-8). For the first time in the history of SLT in school, it was thought not only desirable but possible to give instructional practices a structure and a substance that would activate the student's natural learning mode and, thus, lead to profitable results.

The direct method was, in actual fact, the best known and more widely-used of the so-called *natural methods*, which included the ones of Saveur and Berlitz (Titone 1968: 100-101; Richards and Rodgers 1986: 9-10). The aim of all the natural methods was to simulate the conditions and processes that were thought to undergird NLA in the form and content of the teaching syllabus. For this reason, they amalgamated the use of demonstration, concrete association, pattern practice, imitation, and other procedures and routines into a format that was to be followed by teachers and textbook authors systematically. Although it is true that some of these had historical parallels—e.g. pattern practice drills were traceable to the substitution tables of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century grammars, situational dialogues originated in antiquity and were fine-tuned by Comenius, etc.—never before were they organized within the framework of a specific psychological perspective: SLA = NLA. To put it in contemporary figurative terms, the natural methods designed their "teaching software" on the basis of what was thought to be the student's natural "learning hardware". The way in which it interrelated the language, the teacher, the learner, the classroom situation, and the actions that take place within it changed SLT pedagogical practices in a permanent way. Indeed, many of the direct method's features and techniques continue to be used to this day (whether or not it is known) in a variety of pedagogical approaches.

1.1.2 The reading and oral methods

The first true scientific debate on the validity of the method notion was kindled by the publication in 1917 of Harold Palmer's groundbreaking theoretical treatment of the SLA-SLT interface. Palmer stressed, above all else, that SLT should be more adaptive to the particular needs of the students. Rather than develop a single, standardized format to teach all students, as the congeners of the direct method envisaged, teachers should base their classroom practices, Palmer submitted, on how much material their students could actually absorb. By the early 1920s disenchantment with the direct method had grown considerably. As Palmer suspected, it turned out that the psychological theory on which it was based, namely that SLA = NLA, was not reflective of all aspects of SLA, nor were all the pedagogical principles that it had fostered applicable to all classroom situations.

With the demise of the direct method a new debate was ignited between inductivists and deductivists. From this, two new and highly influential methods—the *reading* and the *oral methods*—emerged. The former grew out of the widely-held view in the 1920s that the only realistically-attainable goal in a non-immersion learning environment was reading comprehension. Like the grammar-translation approach of previous centuries, the originators of the *reading method* stressed the role of grammar instruction in the native language of the learner. But, like the direct method architects, they also stressed proper pronunciation (which was regarded as an indispensable aid to comprehension) and the need to formulate explanations of grammar in terms of a scientific analysis of the target language. They introduced into the general practice of SLT the highly useful notions of controlled vocabulary learning and of graded readers. The reading method continues to be used in modified form to this day, because, as a grammar-translation approach, it makes few demands on teachers, and therefore continues to have considerable appeal in situations where the primary goal of SL study is the reading of literary texts. As Richards and Rodgers (1986: 5) have aptly remarked, it is used today by people trained in literary criticism rather than in applied linguistics or SLA theory; consequently, while it "is still widely practiced, it has no advocates", because it is a method "for which there is no theory".

The *oral method* was developed by British linguists in the 1930s. It was a truly innovative proposal at the time. Indeed, many of its techniques continue to be used today by many textbook authors and syllabus designers. It stressed a strict control over vocabulary, a grading of grammatical items from simple to complex, the oral presentation of new material (hence the name *oral method*), the introduction of reading and writing after it could be determined that a sufficient lexical and grammatical competence was developed by students, the exclusive use of the SL in the classroom, and the situational practice of new notions and structures. Its practice of presenting new material to reflect real-life situations made it highly popular with teachers (Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens (1964: 38). The teaching syllabus, which graded grammatical structures from simple to complex, came a little later to be known as the *structural syllabus*.

1.1.3 The audiolingual and audiovisual methods

By the 1940s and 1950s, disenchantment starting growing with both the reading and oral methods. Once again, as Palmer had suspected about the method notion itself, they were not applicable to every learning situation. Nevertheless, educators of the era did not abandon the aspiration of developing a "universal" method for SLT that would be applicable to all situations. Two developments convinced them that this was within their reach. First, the *behaviorist movement* in psychology provided a new theory of language learning, based on habit formation, that could easily be translated into instructional practices (Bloomfield 1942). Second, the unparalleled success of the so-called *Army specialized training program*, which was designed for army members during World War II on behaviorist principles, suggested that its basic pedagogical plan—the use of imitation, repetition, and dialogue practice stages—was the "panacea" for which teachers had been searching since the reform movement.

These inspired the creation of a new method—the *audiolingual method*—which was heralded in America as the "method to end all methods". It stressed habit-formation, pattern practice, and inductive training procedures. It also rejected the SLA = NLA hypothesis, adopting the view that the stored NL knowledge possessed by learners greatly determined the ways in which they perceived and assimilated the new language. As the linguist Charles Fries (1927, 1945) argued, the motivation for this new view of SLA—known as *transfer theory*—grew out of the common observations of classroom teachers that the pronunciation habits and the grammatical and lexical categories of the NL were unconsciously transferred to the learning of the SL, especially during the initial stages. The technique called *contrastive analysis* was developed from this view. By contrasting the structures of the target and native languages, it was thought possible to determine what areas of pronunciation, grammar would require more emphasis and what areas would not. Those in which NL habits and grammatical categories coincided with SL ones would receive less emphasis because the transfer process—known as *positive transfer*—would allow the students to acquire them unconsciously; those in which they differed would instead receive more emphasis because the transfer process in this case—known as *negative transfer*—would interfere with the acquisition process.

In Europe, the success of the army *program* was translated into a slightly different method that came to be called the *audiovisual method,* developed in the 1950s in France at the *Centre du recherche et d'étude pour la diffusion du français.* The method was very similar in pedagogical design to its American counterpart, stressing pattern practice, habit formation, and the teaching of oral skills before reading and writing skills. But it added an innovative feature to this basic plan—the new material was to be presented visually with filmstrips.

The enthusiastic expectations that both these methods raised were heightened by a naive faith in technology. The incorporation of the "language laboratory" into the *modus operandi* of the audiolingual method, and of visual aids into that of the audiovisual method, were hailed by many teachers at the time as the final missing pieces to the puzzle of what had be done in the classroom to instill true mastery of the SL into the learner. But their enthusiasm turned into disenchantment as a series of events and experiences coalesced by the mid-1960s to bring about the large-scale abandonment of both methods. For one thing, the expectations raised by the two methods were never fulfilled in practice. Moreover, by the 1960s the psychological and linguistic platform upon which they were constructed crumbled under the weight of a new emphasis on *cognitivism* in psychology (Ausubel 1967) and *generativism* in linguistics (Chomsky 1957, 1965). A series of psycholinguistic experiments moreover—especially the one by Scherer and Wertheimer (1964)—showed that no significant learning outcomes were produced by these methods, when compared to grammar-translation approaches.

1.1.4 The cognitive-code method

Based in large part on the theoretical notions of generative linguistics, a new method emerged in the early 1970s, called the *cognitive-code method,* which was designed by applied linguists (e.g. Jakobovits 1971; Chastain 1971; Lugton 1971). The pedagogical outlook of this method was grounded on the notion of *linguistic competence*—namely, that knowing a language consisted in knowing its basic rules of grammatical design. It was thus formatted to provide learning materials and exercises designed to impart knowledge of abstract rules of language organization. However, the method never really "caught on" with teachers at large, so to speak, and was abandoned by the mid-1970s.

The applied linguists of that decade also introduced a new technique into SLT that continues to be used profitably to this day. Known as *error analysis*, it was based on the observation that the kind of competence that students typically manifest as they speak and write—called *interlanguage*—was characterized above all else by predictable, recurring errors (Selinker 1972; Richards 1974; Ludwig 1979; Corder 1981; Robinett and Schachter 1983). *Errors* were distinguished from *mistakes*. The latter were the many blunders that students make but which they can easily correct themselves; the former, instead, revealed gaps in linguistic competence.

Error analyses of student interlanguages made it obvious that there are two main types of errors committed by learners: (1) *interlinguistic*, which are caused by interferences from the NL, i.e. by the negative transfer of some habit or category from the NL to the SL; and (2) *intralinguistic*, which are caused by the same learning mechanisms that characterize NLA, i.e. by generalization, analogy, simplification, etc. Interlanguage theorists claimed that the systematicity and predictability of errors showed that learners typically construct a "working theory" of the SL grammar that is based on certain general principles of language design extrapolated from the input to which they have been exposed.

1.1.5 The communicative language teaching movement

The primary goal of the direct, reading, audiolingual, and audiovisual methods was to provide an appropriate structural syllabus and a specific instructional plan for imparting linguistic competence in a sequential, organized way. The ability to apply the SL structures to real-life communicative situations was assumed to emerge spontaneously after they had been acquired. The only true dissenting voice in this scenario was that of the creators of the oral method (above

§1.1.2). In the other methods, the oral dialogical input was controlled primarily for its structural content; i.e. although it was meant to simulate real-life conversation, it was so watered down and scripted to follow the sequence of structures in the syllabus that it hardly ever resembled real discourse.

In the early 1970s, the linguist Dell Hymes (1972) challenged the idea of linguistic competence as abstract grammatical knowledge that was impervious to influences from real-world communication and social interaction. He proposed that knowledge of language structure was interconnected with knowledge of how to use it appropriately in specific social settings. He called this interconnection *communicative competence*. Hymes' notion held an instant appeal to teachers, who at the time were also beginning to suspect that the method notion was fundamentally flawed, since it entailed the artificial study of language as a code, separate from its uses. This led to a true paradigm shift in language education—as the philosopher Thomas Kuhn (1970) called a radical change in philosophical outlook—which, in turn, led to the *communicative language teaching movement*. This lasted throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

The first steps to develop *communicative syllabi* to replace the previous structural ones were taken by the Council of Europe. Already by the mid-1970s two highly influential syllabi, called the *threshold level* (Van Ek 1975) and the *notional-functional syllabus* (Wilkins 1976), emerged. The organizing principle in both was the concept of *speech act*, defined as a communicative strategy that native speakers employ unconsciously to carry out specific types of social interactions. A simple protocol like saying *hello*, for instance, constitutes a speech act that requires a detailed knowledge of the appropriate words, phrases, structures, and nonverbal cues that come together cohesively in a script-like fashion to enable a speaker to make successful social contact with another speaker. An infringement of any of the procedural details of this script might lead to a breakdown in communication, or worse, to confrontation. Drawing upon the ideas of linguists like Firth (1957) and Halliday (1973, 1975) and philosophers like Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), the early architects of communicative syllabi tailored the structural information pertaining to SL grammar and vocabulary in their syllabi to reflect its uses in speech situations.