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THE WORLD OF SIGNS AND SYMBOLS: AN ENGLISH TEACHER'S DILEMMA

MS. RUPA VEMURI*; MS. PAROMITA MUKHERJEE OJHA**

*Assistant Professor,
Department of English & Humanities
ANITS, Visakhapatnam.

**Associate Professor,
Department of English & Humanities
ANITS, Visakhapatnam.

ABSTRACT

Semiotics, the most vital and innate part of communication, has ironically not received so far, its share of attention by the language theorists. Semiotics is that branch of knowledge which deals with the study of signs and symbols that give a concrete shape to the abstract ideas. Semiotics is the study of signs, which obviously may consist of language, pictures, body language etc. Semioticians study how people interpret and construct a meaning of a particular sign, based upon their previous cultural or personal experiences. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), a founder of linguistics initiated the idea of semiotics in his renowned book 'Course in General Linguistics', in 1916. A few more noteworthy contributors to this field along with Saussure are Charles Sanders Peirce, Charles William Morris, Roland Barthes, Algirdas Greimas, Yuri Lotman, Christian Metz, Umberto Eco and Julia Kristeva.

This paper proposes to discuss how an English Teachers could benefit from the study of semiotics and could make teaching English as a second language a more enriching experience for the students. Till recent times, Semiotics had not been accepted as an academic discipline, thus, depriving the language teachers the basic skills of introducing words and their textual as well as contextual meaning in an effective manner. This forces the language teachers to grope in the dark when it comes to explaining the students about the various ideas and the signs associated with these ideas that are not familiar to the native students who are ignorant of the cultural context of those foreign ideas.

KEYWORDS: *Semiotics, sign, symbol, body language.*

INTRODUCTION

Semiotics, though being the most vital and innate part of communication, has not been given its due recognition by the language theorists and consequently by the language teachers. Teaching English as a second language is usually considered as a herculean task because introducing native ideas in Indian context is not always simple since a particular idea or object is truly foreign. For e.g. the word “broccoli”, is unfamiliar to an Indians as it is not cultivated here. Thus we have no synonym for it. To solve this issue, a language teacher obviously has to use a picture of broccoli for proper understanding. This is where the knowledge of semiotics comes in handy for English language teachers.

Semiotics involves the study not only of what is referred to as ‘signs’ in everyday speech, but of anything which ‘stands for’ something else. In a semiotic sense, signs take the forms of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects. “Not only are words signs but also gesture, images, non-linguistic sounds like the chimes of Big Ben. Obviously devices (such as flags) created by man in order to indicate something are signs, but so are, in ordinary language, the thread of smoke that reveals a fire, the footsteps in the sand that tells Robinson Crusoe a man has passed along the beach, the clue that permits Sherlock Holmes to find the murderer” (Umberto Eco:1973).

This paper proposes to discuss how an English Teacher could benefit from the study of semiotics and could make teaching English as a second/ foreign language a more enriching experience for the students.

Semiotics deals with the study of signs and symbols Viz. words, pictures, gestures and postures which give a concrete shape to the abstract ideas. It studies the relationship between signs and their implicit meanings, also the rules governing the usage of these signs and symbols. Semioticians study how people interpret and construct a meaning of a particular sign, based upon their previous cultural or personal experiences. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, a founder of modern linguistics initiated the idea of semiotics in his renowned book ‘Course in General Linguistics’, in 1916. A few more noteworthy contributors to this field along with Saussure are Charles Sanders Peirce, Charles William Morris, Roland Barthes, Algirdas Greimas, Yuri Lotman, Christian Metz, Umberto Eco and Julia Kristeva. According to Saussure, “semiotics as a discipline has been divided into three branches of study: Syntactics, which deals with the combination of signs, Semantics, which deals with the signification of signs and Pragmatics, which deals with the background of the use of signs and also the effect of their use.”

Pierce defined semiotics to be the ‘scientific study of signaling systems’. He insisted that communication system is made of three basic elements- Symbols, Icons and Indices. According to him Symbol is a sign that is not logically related to the object it signifies. For Example the word ‘cow’, it stands for cow in English, Gai in Hindi, Goru in Bengali. If there had been an intrinsic relationship between the signs and the object they signify, then in all languages ‘cow’ would be called as a ‘cow’. In the same way, a statement like “Ravan killed Ram” may not pose a problem to a native speaker of English, but an Indian student vehemently opposes this statement. To a native speaker the words in the sentence mean a subject, a verb and an object, thus the sentence is correct, whereas to an Indian student the words Ravan and Ram symbolize evil and good respectively. Moreover according to Indian mythology, it was Ram who killed Ravan. Thus the idea of the victory of good over evil has

been always conveyed to Indian student through these examples. So he would never look at the statement as a simple sentence but would always attach the symbolic meaning to it.

Pierce uses the term Icon when the sign used for an object is nonarbitrarily related to its signification. Here the object has some resemblance to its sign, either naturally or perceived culturally by people. This iconicity could be primary or secondary. Words such as cuckoo, bulbul are iconic in character as their names resemble the way they sing. This is primary iconicity. When we call Ms. Lata Mangeshkar 'The Nightingale of India', we mean to say that she sings as beautifully as the bird does. This is the secondary iconicity. An index is an object that indicates or refers to some idea or incident which seems to have no direct relationship. For example the croaking of the frog indicates the advent of monsoon. Frogs do not bring rain but they just indicate the advent of rain. A language teacher obviously uses all these three elements unconsciously while teaching the target language.

It is also obvious that for decades it is believed that mastering vocabulary will be the first step for learning any language. Thus many language teachers attribute importance to teaching vocabulary in their classes. The learner should comprehend what he listens or reads in the target language. Unless he has sufficient knowledge of vocabulary, he can not decode the message sent by the speaker or writer. Now as for semioticians, every word either written or spoken is a sign/symbol. It signifies certain concept or object. There are two central concerns of semiotics. First, it deals with the relationship between the sign and its meaning. Second, semiotics studies the way by which signs are combined through following certain rules or codes (Kim 1996:3). It is important to know the background of the vocabulary teaching methods generated and followed by several language theorists over the last century.

BACKGROUND OF VOCABULARY TEACHING

The previous century had witnessed the experimentation of various methods of teaching target language starting with 'Grammar Translation Method' where vocabulary was taught by means of a list of translated words and a bilingual dictionary. The students were expected to learn new words through translating sentences from their mother tongue into English and obviously students failed to learn correct pronunciation of English words. Grammar rules were not stressed much upon since the aim of the teacher was to help students acquire and expand their vocabulary at the earliest. Later finding it to be a redundant method, the language theorists vociferously voiced the need of teaching vocabulary through construction of sentences within a meaningful context and called it 'The Direct Method.' It stressed on teaching vocabulary through pictures, classroom objects, miming, drawings and explanations.

During the 1930s and 1960s English schools applied 'The Situational Language Teaching Method' where new words were explained neither in the native language nor in the target language. The learners were encouraged to deduce the meaning of the new words from the situation that was presented to them by the teacher. The teacher was free to use objects, pictures, action as well as mime within the situation to convey the meaning to the students.

With the closure of World War II, 'The Audio-lingual method' was developed where few simple words were chosen and the audio was played to help students develop their vocabulary in a foreign language. Towards the beginning of 1970s the audio-lingual method was severely criticized as exposure to only a limited number of vocabulary was thought to hinder the students' from developing fluency in using and mastering grammatical structures of a foreign language. Thus, 'The Cognitive Approach' was developed in which the language

teacher was expected to teach the meanings of the words. The teacher was encouraged to use various techniques like contextualization, drawings, objects, projectors, OHPs, even synonyms and antonyms.

In the mid-1960s British linguists like M.A.K Halliday, Henry Widdowson initiated 'The Communicative Approach' where new words were not taught in isolation, but in the context of a complete sentence and also as part of realistic situations. It became easy for students to understand the meaning easily as the words were taught within a meaningful situation and context. There was another path-breaking approach developed by Michael Lewis in 1993, named as 'The Lexical Approach.' He stressed that language cannot be learnt only through mastering grammar and vocabulary, but through mastering collocations to promote fluency in the target language. A collocation is two or more words that often go together. These combinations come naturally to native English speakers, who use them frequently, however for non-native English speakers without proper knowledge of collocations it becomes a herculean task to form right combinations of words. Lexical approach stressed that students can use these multi-word chunks like collocations, phrasal verbs, idioms, proverbs to facilitate fluency in the target language.

Now, 'Content- based instruction' has become the lifeline of language teachers. In this approach vocabulary is taught within specific context and the content is designed keeping in mind the knowledge students already possess about the target language. The text books used in the teaching –learning method is specially written for teaching language for specific purposes. From the above discussion it is clear that none of these methods used in isolation will help the language teachers in teaching the target language. They have to find the right combination of some of these methods and also take some critical decisions about the course material, audio-visual aids, activities and content to be used for achieving better results.

METHODS TO TEACH VOCABULARY TO NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS OF THE TARGET LANGUAGE

Theorists and language practitioners have advocated various methods to enable language teachers to impart knowledge about new vocabulary to the students. The various methods are as follows:

- Visuals
- Proverbs/Idioms
- Synonyms/ Antonyms
- Venn diagrams, tree diagrams
- Context
- Acting/ Mime
- Examples/ Hyponyms
- Description in detail

- Definition/ Anecdotes
- Context
- Translation
- Collocations.

IMPORTANCE OF SEMIOTICS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

It is a fact that teaching any language as a foreign language should pursue the goal of providing the learner not only with a linguistic, but moreover with an intercultural competence. To attain this goal, the teaching of a foreign language must also be the teaching of a foreign culture. To learn a language through understanding its culture means cognitive learning of proverbs, idioms, onomatopoeic words and compound/collocations of the target language. While teaching English as a foreign language using semiotic elements especially the audio and visual aids by the way of multimedia technology will provide students with a better understanding of the vocabulary items and help them develop socio-pragmatic and socio-semiotic competence in the target language. British linguist M.A.K. Halliday too considers language as “social semiotic”. According to him “Language is one of the semiotic systems that constitute a culture; one that is distinctive in that it also serves as an encoding system for many (though not all) of the others.” (Halliday:1988,2). This helps the English language teachers to understand that language is a discourse- the exchange of meanings in the interpersonal contexts of one kind or the other. Moreover language is learned by a person at two stages. First he learns language as a basic tool to express things of his basic needs. In the second stage, he replaces this by a symbolic system, thus converting it into a semantic system with structural realizations. Therefore it can be said that semiotics not only helps learners to get the right message through semiotics signs to avoid cross-cultural failure, but also encourages the language teachers to play a critical role in the classroom. Hodge and Kress (1988:26) claim, “Students of cross cultural communication know how often misunderstanding arises because of different assumptions in different cultural groups. Undoubtedly, it creates heavy demand to extend semiotics in this way, to include the description and analysis of the stock of cultural knowledge in a given society.” Thus semiotics is a very influential and essential field of study, because by making use of signs the learners are able to achieve a lot of information in all the branches of knowledge.

The English language teachers face problems in teaching vocabulary items that reflect the cultural characteristics of the English language. Since colour names, proverbs, idioms, compound words and the use of lexical items in literary texts exhibit culture specific properties, language teacher may encounter some problems teaching these items to their teachers. Here difficulties in teaching culture-specific vocabulary items with semiotic elements will be discussed. When the students learn new words or expressions related to colors, they visualize these words or expressions and attempt to guess the meaning by relating it to the color system in their mother tongue. For example the idiom ‘blue in the face’ actually means when one unsuccessfully attempts to do a thing over a long period of time’ However in maximum number of cases the students fail to understand the actual meaning due to their unfamiliarity with the color codes of the target language. The color blue represents happiness in Japanese culture and Saudi Arabian culture, purity in Chinese and sea in Turkish culture. Thus idiomatic expressions using color code poses problem for students attempting

to learn English, as colors being social signs are culture-specific. In the case of proverbs, the proverbs are developed from the wisdom gained from everyday experiences which is unique to the culture /region of the people. To avoid this problem teacher can use visual materials like pictures or cartoons which are nothing more than semiotic elements to enable student to visualize the meanings of the proverbs and also help them to retain the meaning in their long-term memory.

Idioms are innately related to semiotics as they bring visual images to the mind of the learners. Wallace (1988:116) states that “idioms are a special form of collocation encountered by every learner.” Like in the case of this idiom ‘raining like cats and dogs’. In the case of the idiom mentioned above raining like cats and dogs have no direct connection with the animals so it becomes sometimes difficult for the student to guess the meaning. Visual inputs are helpful to teach these kinds of proverbs and also explaining the context. The problems are the same for the language teacher while teaching the onomatopoeic words or compound words.

CONCLUSION

The primary motive to teach English Language is to help the students to associate the meanings of the words with the objects they depict and to retain the correct meanings in the long term memory of the students. Correct usage of semiotic elements helps the learners to understand the meanings of the words by presenting visual feedback. When the language teachers use pictures, charts, cartoons, Venn diagrams, grid or tree diagrams they enable the students to learn new words in the target language and also help them to retain the new vocabulary permanently in their minds. It is a well known fact that visuals promote retention to a higher degree than any other methods. When the students are taught idioms, synonyms, antonyms, proverbs, homonyms etc they become self-reliant as they manage to understand the meanings of words by making use of their learning in semantics. It is the teachers’ responsibility to constantly motivate the students so that they learn new vocabulary with enthusiasm and improve their proficiency in the target language. Finally, it can be stated that language teachers should master not only the sound and spelling but also the lexicon and the semiotics of the English language.

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