Deciphering Representational Language through Stylistic Analysis of Poetry

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Abstract

In a globalized world, one needs to communicate bearing in mind the context, the role and the relationship between the interlocutors. Put the other way, communicative competence calls for both linguistic competence and pragmatic competence. One needs to know what to say, when to say, how to say and why to say it. Literature can play a very vital role in developing these competencies as it presents a plethora of different situations, characters and roles. Literature also highlights how verbal ironies are created through the use of language inappropriate to the context, the role and the role relationship. Its aesthetic and human approach, blended with the use of contextualized language, aids language acquisition, especially in the case of those who learn English as a second or foreign language. However, despite the beneficial role literature plays in developing communicative competence, there are at least a few English language teaching (ELT) practitioners and students who resist the majestic and spirited come back literature has made in language classrooms after a period of gratuitous exclusion. This rejection of literature, as symbolic interactionists put it, could also be an offspring of cultural and religious filaments. In view of this, in this paper, I attempt to find out what makes the study of literature, poetry in particular, difficult for students. I conducted this case study in an Arab university through an open class discussion with thirty-five second semester level three students of poetry.

Key words: representational language, deviation, metaphorical meaning, cognitive capacities, interpretation, communication competence

Introduction

'Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man' says Francis Bacon in his essay entitled *Of Studies.* There have been very few words such as these that highlight the importance of reading. Reading plays a crucial role not only in language acquisition but also in developing one's imaginative and cognitive capabilities and in developing intercultural communicative competence.

As far as language acquisition, especially in the case of foreign language learners, is concerned, reading is considered the mother skill as it is often the only main source students are exposed to. Reading exposes the readers to new vocabulary in different contexts, allowing them to grasp the meaning and usage of words more effectively. Through reading learners also encounter authentic language structures, idiomatic expressions, and grammatical patterns. As learners encounter well-written texts, they absorb the language naturally, internalizing correct sentence structures and grammatical rules. This exposure helps learners develop a sense of linguistic intuition and improves their overall language production skills. Moreover, reading provides models for proper language usage, leading to enhanced writing skills and improved oral fluency.

Reading also enhances one's cognitive capacity and improves comprehension. As Gray (1967) explains;

> When we read something, we understand it at three levels: "first, the purely literal responding to the graphic signals only with little depth of understanding, the second level at which the readers recognize the author's meaning, and the third level where the readers' own personal experiences and judgements influence their responses to the text "(as cited in Webster, 1982, p.19).

Put differently, reading involves reading the lines, reading between the lines and reading beyond the lines. That is why reading is described as thinking under the stimulus of the

printed page (Webster, 1982, p. 30). Reading demands thinking as readers are challenged to understand and interpret various forms of written communication. Through reading, learners develop critical thinking skills such as inferring meaning from context, identifying main ideas, and understanding implicit information. These skills, in turn, enhance overall language comprehension, facilitating effective communication in both written and spoken forms.

The reading of literature is of paramount importance in a globalized world because through literature, learners gain insights into different cultures, traditions, and perspectives. As Sivasubramaniam (2015) puts it, competence and proficiency are not mere approximation to a linguistic code. Rather they are a phenomenon in which learners cross the border of their first language into a second language in order to reconstruct their selves and world (p.74). In doing this, they develop empathy, critical thinking skills, and a broader worldview, all of which are imperative for successful intercultural communication.

The text and the reader: Why is literature difficult?

Communicative competence demands the production of language appropriate to varying contexts. As communicative acts are also interactive acts, interlocutors need to interpret messages appropriately to make communication meaningful. As Veettil & Thakur (2022) opine, literature cannot be understood fully through our linguistic knowledge. Words can convey more than what they literally mean depending on the context of the utterance especially if the interlocutor uses representational language (p.168). One of the pitfalls in communication leading to communication failure is the ineptitude to interpret representational use of language. Referential use of language is easy to follow as it communicates directly. However, representational language poses challenges and may lead to misinterpretations and misunderstandings.

This kind of language use is not strictly limited to canonical literature but can also be seen in advertisements, displays and even in day-to-day communication. What marks representational language is the creativity in it. As creative use of language may involve deviations at different levels of language, critical analysis is imperative to make meaning out of it. There can also be hermeneutic and interpretive gaps as not everything is said explicitly in literature. The text, as Bennet & Royale (2014) put it, prompts the readers to fill in or fill out such hermeneutic or interpretative 'gaps' imaginatively (p.13). Literature cannot claim objectivity because hermeneutics or the interpretation of language in literary works mainly depends on the readers; their life experiences, world knowledge and cognitive capacity not to mention the linguistic competence. As Nunn, Brandt & Deveci (2018) state, no analysis or evaluation is devoid of some subjective or intersubjective premises which may be seen as biases or hidden assumptions (p.87). Thus, the readers' interaction with the text, as the proponents of reader-response theory put it, is central to interpretation and success in reading (Kirszner & Mandel, 2007). Reading, especially the reading of literary works, is not merely a cognitive exercise; rather it also involves aesthetic appreciation. As Schieble (2010) says, readers have to approach a text aesthetically and efferently to construct meaning from the text (as cited in Mart, 2019, p.81). Aesthetic reading requires the readers to consider the feelings and emotions a text creates in their minds. It is reading for pleasure. However, efferent reading focuses on the experience-based meanings stored in the readers' minds and how they apply those meanings to the text with the purpose of gaining information. Krashen's (2020) study showed that aesthetic reading (reading for pleasure) counts though it is not proved to be more efficient than efferent reading (p.4). Literature introduces students to the beauty of using language in different ways. In fact, one of the very definitions given to literature is that it is written works which are of artistic value. That is to say, it is the making or expression of what is beautiful. Literature, primarily, has to offer aesthetic pleasure. However, the concept of beauty or aesthetics is different and

changeable. What is considered beautiful in one culture may not be considered so in another. What evokes pity and fear in one culture need not do so in another. As Patil (2015) rightly puts it, patterns of behavior acceptable in one culture need not be so in another culture because perceptions of power, hierarchy and solidarity are not the same everywhere. What goes as a greeting in one culture could sound as intrusive and disrespectful in another (p.144). Thus, aesthetic appreciation of an anglophone literary work becomes difficult, if not impossible, for non-anglophones unless they take an ethnographic stand putting themselves in the shoes of the anglophone. For example, an aesthetic appreciation of Wordsworth's poem 'Daffodils' could be marred by lack of knowledge about what the dancing of the daffodils symbolizes. Daffodils symbolize renewed life and vigor as they bloom in spring ushering in the coming of summer in the highlands of England where the winter is long and dreary. The dancing of the daffodils in the poem is a promise of the forthcoming summer and of bright days and sunny skies. Students may not find any significance, as happened in my class, in 'the poet's attitude of sheer joy at seeing the daffodils dance' if they are not aware of the above-mentioned facts (Sriraman & Sengupta, 1995, pp. 48-49). By implication, any interpretation of a literary text calls for a consideration of the culture behind it.

Yet another thing that alienates non-anglophone readers from Anglophone Literature, as Maleh (2005) observes, is the western cultural milieu that holds sets of values and codes of morality different even from their western counterparts. The readers need to be trained to read the foreign text cross-culturally by trying to bestride the cultural divide and traverse moral controversy if the reading is to yield succulent results (p.8). As Quirk, et al. (1985) say, "when an English man says something is not cricket (fair) the allusion is also to a game that is by no means universal in the English-speaking countries" (p.6). Arab learners of English literature for whom summer is not a very pleasant experience may fail to get the quintessence of Wordsworth's 'Five years have past; five summers, with the length/of five

long winters!' if they do not realize what summer means to them and to the English. Words and expressions may have different connotative meanings in different cultures. As I (Veettil, 2018) point out, it will be unfair to expect an Arab learner of literature to interpret correctly the expression 'May you always wear red'. The readers need to know what wearing red in this context means and its cultural significance (p.82).

The inseparable relation between every language and the culture it represents often poses a challenge to readers from other cultures. Though the internalization of the English language, as Kachru (1996) says, has expanded its contours to represent different cultures and literatures and there is an expansion of the cultural identity (pp.357-58), e.g. most works of anglophone literature such as Milton's 'Paradise Lost', 'Paradise Regained', Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', Hopkin's 'the Wreck of the Deutschland' etc. represent the Judeo-Christian assumptions. The dichotomy between the beliefs and the value concepts presented in these works of literature often invite frowning from Arab learners of English literature. The alienation and the estrangement these works create in them result in a failure to identify themselves with the protagonists in these works, which, in turn, takes away one of the ultimate rewards of reading literature, namely catharsis and purgation.

Sriraman & Sengupta (1995) cite the experience of a teacher who tried to translate Shakespeare's Hamlet to a group of students from a particular tribe in Africa. The students thought the drama to be an implausible and absurd account of a prince going mad on flimsy grounds. They could not understand how such a petty problem as killing the stepfather could create havoc in society. They also wondered why Hamlet did not kill his mother to begin with. They even went to the extreme of commenting that the British people were cowardly (p.49).

Developments in critical thinking have emphasized the significant role of the reader, marking a notable shift in the critical paradigm from the author. Many argue that the reader now holds a crucial and central position in the creation of meaning. In fact, the meanings conveyed by any given text are realized and formed by readers, drawing upon their understanding of the cultural codes employed by that society for the text to convey meaning. Readers decode and interpret texts based on their prior knowledge of the world and their personal belief systems, which enable them to make sense of references. In essence, a text lacks inherent meaning until it is interpreted by a reader, who actively constructs and assigns significance during the reading process.

Many of the changes in our understanding of literature and literary theory stem from the linguistic revolution that occurred during the twentieth century. At the core of these changes is Ferdinand de Saussure's (1983) concept of the arbitrariness of meaning, which suggests that there is no inherent reason why something is called by a specific name (p.67). Saussure's differentiation between syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations among signs has significant implications for interpreting literary texts. The syntagmatic aspect of language refers to the placement of a sign within a particular utterance. This means that the meaning of a word is influenced by its position in a sentence and its relationship to other words and grammatical units within that sentence. Additionally, a word's meaning in a sentence is also influenced by its association with other words that could have been used in its place. Although these alternative words are not present in the actual sentence, they share a paradigmatic relationship with the word being considered.

Each culture has its own specific conventions, leading to wide divergences in the significance of signs within language. For instance, the concept of "early marriage" can vary in meaning across cultures, as different societies have varying opinions about the age of maturity. Arab readers of Shakespeare may disapprove of Lord Capulets argument that his

daughter Juliet is 'still a stranger in the world' as they do not have a specific marriageable age for girls in their culture. Some of my students believe that a girl is ready for marriage when she matures physically. It becomes evident that language is bound by its context and shaped by the conventions constructed from the speech habits of a community. As Kaplan (1966) explains:

> The English language and its related thought patterns have evolved out of the Anglo-European cultural pattern. The expected sequence of thought in English is essentially a Platonic-Aristotelian sequence, descended from the philosophers of ancient Greece and shaped subsequently by Roman, Medieval European, and later Western thinkers. It is not a better nor is a worse system than any other, but it is different (p.3).

Language is a social phenomenon that cannot be isolated or detached from its cultural context. Literature, being a verbal construct, employs words with great efficiency and ambiguity, requiring readers to interpret them appropriately. However, as Nor & Nawi (2023) observe, students' cultural biases against foreign literature can discourage them from engaging with literary texts. The lack of familiarity with the subject matter can create emotional, social, and historical disconnection between the students and the characters, leading to a lack of motivation and inability to relate to the texts (p.139). Therefore, Arab learners of English literature need to develop an empathetic understanding of English culture to comprehend and appreciate English literary texts effectively.

Al-Mahrooqi (2012) ascribes the challenges Omani students face in reading English literature to the Arab culture lacking in a reading culture. She observes that this contributes to underdeveloped reading not only in English but also in Arabic which is their mother tongue. Thus, the possibility of positive transfers from the skills acquired in the mother tongue to a second/ foreign language becomes an impossibility in the case of Arab readers

of English literature (p.27). In addition to many others, Mahrooqi's study highlighted several issues such as linguistic features, cultural differences and the poor language proficiency of the readers as the main challenges Omani college students face while reading English literature.

Voice and Agency: What the learners say

My level three students of poetry, who were the participants in this study, also talked about almost all the challenges to reading English literature discussed in Mahrooqi's (2012) study. However, they did not find all the genres equally difficult. Of all the literary genres, they found short stories the easiest to follow and poetry the most difficult. As they opined, it was mainly due to the stylistic features unique to poetry. As poetry is the other way of using language, it is often resplendent with symbols, different levels of meaning, ambiguity, allusions, equivocations and deviations from the normal use of language. These, in addition to other challenges mentioned earlier, make the enjoyment of poems a herculean task for them. As reflected in the saying about poetry 'if you ask me, I do not know. If you don't ask, I know', the elusive nature of poetry makes its enjoyable reading a herculean task for them.

Many of my students said that syntactic features such as enjambments and inversions also made poetry difficult for them. However, all the participants voiced that it was the indirect ways of expressing ideas or the representational use of language that significantly marred their enjoyment of reading poems. For example, they said that they could not understand the significance of the title 'Sailing to Byzantium' till I explained what Byzantium stands for. Similarly, W.B. Yeats' another poem 'The Second Coming' was also baffling to them to a great extent because of the symbols and the reference to the Spiritus Mundi. It was also laborious for them to understand and appreciate how 'the twenty centuries of stony sleep were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle'. My students said that the major challenge in appreciating poetry is the ambiguity created by the symbolic and indirect use of language.

Analysis and interpretation of lines such as 'The curfew tolls the knell of the parting day' and 'The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she' was not an easy task for them.

As Varnavas (2015) identifies, the primary challenge in understanding poetry, whether it's works by Keats, Shelley, Whitman, or Leonard Cohen, lies in our innate inclination to communicate and interpret things in a highly literal manner. We often express ourselves in explicit terms to ensure clarity and understanding. Consequently, when we encounter poetic communication, we tend to approach it in the same literal manner, attempting to extract a direct meaning. However, this approach does not work well with poetry. By its nature, great poetry is nonliteral and transcends the confines of straightforward interpretation. As an art form, it conveys profound truths in a unique and original way, specific to the artist who composed it. Therefore, the initial step in understanding poetry is to suppress the inclination for literal certainty. Instead, one should read it silently and aloud, allowing the words to resonate within, appreciating it as an artistic experience even if its meaning is not immediately apparent. It's important not to criticize oneself for not grasping its meaning right away because understanding poetry requires us to let go of our literal expectations, immerse ourselves in the words, images, and symbols, and embrace the artistic expression, even if we struggle to extract a clear-cut meaning.

To this end, there is a dire need to familiarize students with the different levels of language use in literary works in general and poetry in particular. They also need to be trained in the meaning making process so as to be enabled to understand representational use of language.

Levels of Meaning and Cognitive Capacity

One of the ways to help students improve their cognitive capacity is to familiarize them with the different levels of language use in poems. Students need to be made aware that poets often deviate from the traditional norms of language use in order to create poetic effects to

catch the readers' attention to certain texts and to create different levels of meanings. This, in stylistics, is known as 'foregrounding'. As Simpson (2004) puts it, foregrounding is a stylistic technique that involves distorting the text in some way, either by deviating from linguistic norms or by emphasizing certain elements through repetition or parallelism. This means that there are two main types of foregrounding: one that deviates from the norm and another that intensifies familiar elements. In essence, foregrounding is a technique of making language appear strange or unfamiliar (p.50), for example, the title of a poem being 'Delicious Death'. This kind of foregrounding draws students' attention, makes them highly curious about how a death could be delicious and therefore motivates them to immediately read it. As Thakur (2021) explains, the poet's vantage point; the foreground, in the poems and the critical thinking tasks and activities carefully designed on them offer higher order cognitive opportunities of critical interpretation and evaluation for the students (p. 33). However, if readers look for one-to-one conceptual correspondence between what is said and what is meant, they are sure to miss the very quintessence of what they read and miss the opportunity of using and enhancing their voice and agency. To avoid this, students should be exposed to different ways of foregrounding and the levels of language use. For example, they may be asked to identify the predominant /s/ sound in the line 'A screaming comes across the sky' and what it suggests. My students came up with ideas such as the hissing of a snake and the sound produced when something moves very fast. They gave up the first suggestion when it was pointed out that it is screaming and it comes across the sky. Some of my students suggested the movement of rockets and planes and when I directed them to the use of 'screaming' as something that moves across the sky and what screaming can be associated with, they gradually came to the interpretation that it could refer to air attacks launched on a city and the screaming they create. The analysis at the level of syntax and phonology helped my students both understand and appreciate the line. Poets can bring in creativity at different levels of language use such as phonology and

phonetics, morphology, syntax, graphology, semantics and pragmatics. Familiarizing students with the linguistic choices at different levels will help them understand and appreciate poems in a better way.

Familiarizing students with the meaning making process is yet another way to help them infer meanings from representational use of language which, in turn, will also lead them to a better enjoyment of literary works in general and poetry in particular.

Differentiating literary texts form nonliterary texts

Once the students are introduced to different levels of meaning and how they are achieved through the foregrounded use of language in literary texts, it will be a good idea to ask them to distinguish between literary and nonliterary texts. This will help in deepening their understanding of the different ways in which language is used in literary texts. We can also ask them to identify the features that make a given text literary. For example, we can ask them to distinguish the literary texts from the nonliterary one from a pair of given texts as in the following:

    a) All your brothers and sisters have been badly burned flying around street and house lamps respectively.

    b) All your brothers have been badly burned flying around street lamps and all your sisters have been terribly singed flying around house lamps.

Text 'a' contains no poetic or literary words. The language used is denotative and referential rather than connotative and emotive. It creates an atmosphere by giving not a general description but by particularizing and concretizing, especially with the use of the word 'respectively'. This kind of analysis should help the learners conclude that text 'a' is nonliterary.

On the other hand, text 'b' successfully employs the literary techniques of 'synonymy' and 'parallelism' and makes the passage literary. Synonymy can be seen in the meaning relation between the expressions 'badly burned' and 'terribly singed'. The two main clauses in the sentence are parallel in structure and makes the sentence more appealing to the reader by giving it a rhythmic structure. The analysis of the use of language in the text will certainly help the students understand that text 'b' is literary. This, in turn, will also help them realize how the different ways of language use in texts makes them more meaningful and pleasing to the readers.

The meaning making process

Practice exercises in the meaning making process will enable students to interpret representational language and arrive at their own meanings. Linguistic, contextual and general knowledge form the basis for inferring an appropriate interpretation of any representational text and students need to be made aware of this. Based on their world knowledge, they should be encouraged to come out with a list of possible substitutions, the normal paradigm, for the verb used in the metaphorical construction, the abnormal paradigm. A comparison of the meaning of the normal paradigm with the abnormal paradigm will help in deriving the meaning from the line. The following may be considered an example:

That corpse you planted last year in your garden

Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?

Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?

To interpret the expression 'That corpse you planted', we need to see if it is an expression in the normal paradigm or not. 'corpse' refers to the dead body of a human being which is not capable of sprouting or blooming. We can go on to construct a nonliteral interpretation

for it only after deducing that what the expression says is not literally true. A comparison of a normal paradigm with the abnormal paradigm, as shown below, will help us draw an acceptable meaning of the expression.

As we can see, 'planted' is the verb in the first line of the extract taken form Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Given below is a set of possible substitutions in the normal paradigm to be compared with the abnormal paradigm 'That corpse you planted':

Normal Paradigm   **Abnormal paradigm**

We plant cucumber   We plant corpses

We plant beets

We plant tomatoes

We plant carrots

We plant orange seeds

We plant flowers

A study of the normal paradigm shows that we plant seeds or saplings that are part of the reproductive system of vegetation and not human beings. Our world knowledge also tells us that we do not plant decayed seeds or dead saplings. We also know that seeds and seedlings reproduce the same kind of plants they belong to. For example, orange seeds grow into orange trees and not apple trees. Similarly, if we plant corpses, we get more corpses in return. Thus, the metaphorical meaning of the expression 'That corpse you planted' can be rightly interpreted as violence breeding violence and evil breeding evil.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges literature teaching/learning pose, it can be effectively used in developing both linguistic skills and cognitive abilities. When the learners are familiarized with the different levels of meanings created through foregrounding, they will start

appreciating deviations and creative use of language. This, in turn, will lead to the development of their aesthetic sensibility and critical thinking skills. If truth is beauty and beauty is truth, aesthetic sensibility is a must. The challenge of interpreting representational texts can be tackled efficiently through familiarizing the learners with the different ways of foregrounding in literature, the features of literary texts and the process of meaning making. Literature also helps raise awareness of varying cultures and practices and make the learners tolerant to other cultures and pragmatically competent in intercultural communications.

The paradigm shift in critical thinking and literary analysis is that the role of the reader in the meaning making process has become pivotal. The readers construct and realize the meaning on the basis of their knowledge of the semiotic codes available in their culture for the text to signify. Put the other way, the readers' world knowledge and their belief structure influence the way they decipher or interpret a text. Without this interpretation or co-construction of meaning, a text can signify nothing meaningful.

Many of the changes that have taken place in our understanding of literature and literary theory proceed from the revolution in linguistics that has swept through a major part of the twentieth century, and at the root of these changes is Ferdinand de Saussure's (1983) concept of the arbitrariness of meaning. This means that there is no intrinsic reason why something is called by a particular name (p.67) Saussure's distinction between syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations among signs has important bearing on the issue of interpretation of a literary text. According to him, the syntagmatic element in any language refers to the positioning of a sign in any particular utterance. For example, the meaning of a word is determined partially by its position in the sentence and its relation to other words and grammatical units in the sentence; this is the words' syntagmatic aspect. The meaning of a word in a sentence is also determined by its relationship to other words which could have

been used in its place. These words are not present in the actual sentence but stand in a paradigmatic relationship to the word under consideration. As Sriraman & Sengupta (1995) put it, each culture has its own specific conventions and we find wide divergences among cultures regarding the significance of any sign in the language (p.36). For example, the meanings of 'early marriage', 'revenge' and 'atheism' among many others, are not the same in all the cultures. Lord Capulet's reluctance to agree to her daughter Juliet's marriage is that she is 'still a stranger in the world' may not be approved in all cultures as people have varying opinions about the age of maturity.

What emerges is the fact that language is context-bound, and is also a matter of conventions constructed out of the speech habits of a community. It is a social phenomenon, and cannot be isolated or uprooted from its context. Literature is essentially a verbal construct and literary texts contain a very efficient and ambiguous use of words that the readers have to interpret appropriately. That is to say, the Arab learners of English literature need to have a sympathetic understanding of the English culture in order to make sense of the English literary texts. It is expected that the activities suggested above will help literature students in the analysis and the deciphering of the literary texts they interact with.

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