

Language and Culture in the Classroom : a semeiotic perspective.

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Introduction

In its 'Course of Study Council' (教育課程審議会 (Kyoiku Katei Singi Kai)) of 6 October, 1997, the Japanese Education Ministry decided that, in preference to the introduction of English language teaching, a new course that emphasises 'International Understanding' is to be introduced to the Japanese elementary school curriculum from the year 2003. The reasons behind the Ministry of Education's decision are complicated, but one main impetus is the belief that the development of an open attitude towards non-Japanese people, cultures, and languages is more important at the early stages of education in Japan than is the teaching of one particular foreign language. The Ministry has also stressed that it is important for students to learn about their own Japanese culture in order to better understand that of other countries. The Ministry's rejection of English language as a subject in the curriculum was no doubt also influenced by the political trend towards a stronger identification of Japan with its neighbouring countries in Asia and by a more general reaction against the dominance of the English language and of Anglo-American influence over the many other languages and cultures of the world. Agreement or disagreement, therefore, with the Education Ministry's decision to introduce 'International Understanding' to Japanese elementary schools involves not only a consideration of the role of second/foreign language learning in education, but it also involves our own personal ideological stance towards the role of the English language in the world today and towards the role of both language and culture in the classroom.

If we agree that there is a general tendency in Japan towards an 'us and them' (内(uti) — 外(soto)) approach to things non-Japanese, and if we also agree that the current dominance of the English language and of Anglo-American culture is detrimental to the recognition, acceptance, and development of other languages and cultures, then it can be argued that the Ministry of Education's decision was correct. However, we are now faced with the problem of how to implement the 'International Understanding' class. The Ministry's guidelines do not specify the syllabus or teaching methodology for the class but leave teachers free to implement the course in their own individual ways, and such freedom is essential if we are to avoid the limitation and narrowness of viewpoint that results from too strict an imposition of any particular teaching method. However, the Ministry also leaves the different elementary schools and the different teachers within these schools wide latitude within which to decide their own individual interpretations of what is meant by 'International Understanding,' and this lack of guidance in the basic principles of the course could, I feel, lead to problems in the 'International Understanding' class. As noted by Kramersch (1993: 1), 'culture is difference,

variability, and always a potential source of conflict when one culture enters into contact with another,' and I would like to suggest that there exists the very real potential that, if taught in the absence of an overall guiding framework, rather than improving Japanese children's understanding of other cultures, the new 'International Understanding' class may result in the strengthening of cultural stereotypes and the reinforcement of existing cultural prejudices.

'Culture' is an area too expansive, and the teaching of language in cultural context is an activity too important to be left to individual interpretation and implementation. Rather, the teaching of language and culture needs to be carried out under the influence of a clearly defined educational philosophy that sets both within their wider social and ideological contexts. This paper attempts to situate the teaching of language and culture within Peircean semeiotic theory, and suggests that semeiotic theory may provide the necessary all-inclusive type of framework that allows us to understand the position of both our own and others' languages and cultures within the greater social and ideological contexts that constitute our world.

Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness

Peirce relates his semeiotic theory to language in his paper 'The Logic of Relatives', first delivered in 1898 as one of a series of Cambridge Conference Lectures entitled 'Reasoning and the Logic of Things'. Peirce's theory is complex, and what now follows is my attempt to make his original paper more accessible to those interested in its application to the teaching of language and culture in the classroom.

Basic to Peircean thought is the idea that our world can be considered in terms of three modes of existence which he terms Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. These three notions are at first difficult to grasp in the abstract, and I would therefore like to explain with reference to concrete examples - and in specific relation to the teaching of language and culture - what I take to be their meaning. I could take as a starting point any number of examples, but I will borrow from Kramsch (1993 : 2) :

'a rose, maybe, is a rose, but it is not une rose, is not eine Rose, but multiple ways of viewing and talking about roses'.

Kramsch's view of the inextricability of language and culture is influenced greatly by Michael Halliday's (1978) social semeiotic theory, and Halliday's theory in turn is very much in harmony with the Peircean perspective. In the above, Kramsch essentially states that the different namings of the same entity (in this case 'rose') by different cultures and languages results in different perspectives on and interpretations of that entity. Kramsch, however, does not pursue this idea by giving any more concrete comment on what these different cultural perspectives might be. I would now like to discuss what I consider to be some of the differences among the perspectives on and meanings of 'rose' as created by the English, French, and German languages. As the basis of my discussion, I use Peircean semeiotic theory - and specifically the notions of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness.

Let us first consider the question: 'What is a rose?' However, I would like you to try to consider a 'rose' in total isolation from everything that is not itself. This is difficult, because by our very consideration of it, we are not leaving it in isolation but are coming into contact with it; perhaps, however, if we at least resist naming it, we are minimising our intrusion upon it. This rose existing in and of itself and without intrusion from outside is existing in the mode of being that Peirce refers to as Firstness.

However, there is another type of Firstness. Now look at a rose (or, if you like, a work of art) and sense it. Don't name, analyse, or interpret it. Just sense it. This type of immediate, non analysed feeling that is created when we encounter an entity is also Firstness.

Firstness, then, is both an entity in itself and the basic sense, or feeling, that an entity creates in us.

From the viewpoint of Firstness, then, a rose (or our sense of it) is a rose, is une rose, is eine Rose - because the entity (or our sense of it) is in an existence that is independent of all naming or interpretation.

Now let us consider 'a rose', 'une rose', and 'eine Rose'. All these namings refer to the same Firstness type of entity. However, by naming it in different ways, we have intruded upon the entity's Firstness, thereby creating for it another type of existence. Whereas the Firstness existence was pure and untouched, this other, Secondness existence takes place in a more real-world and social sphere. In this Secondness world, the entity only has meaning in relation to other entities; a rose only has meaning in relation to other roses, other flowers, and other things that are not roses or flowers. This Secondness world is a world of similarities, contrasts, opposites. It is also a world of force and action, where the very way we talk about a rose can change what it is to be a rose. In this Secondness world, entities (or roses) do not simply exist. They are made.

Next we consider the French naming of 'a rose' as 'la rose'. Leaving aside the question of any metaphorical meaning that may be attached to 'la rose' within French culture (as, for example, there is in the case of an 'English rose'), we note that 'rose' in French has the article 'la'. This means that 'rose' in French (as in the German 'eine Rose') takes the feminine and not the masculine (un (French); ein (German)) form of the article. This, in turn, carries the implied meaning that a 'rose' is feminine and not masculine, which in turn carries other implied meanings relating to what is considered to be feminine and masculine characteristics within the specific cultures within which the 'rose' is being named. The result of this particular naming of 'rose' in French and German according to gender is that the rose actually becomes (in the minds of those who name it, if not in its own Firstness) feminine (and this notion of what it is to be 'feminine' is again defined by the society within which the rose is being named).

This classification of 'rose' as having stereotypical 'feminine' characteristics is evident, for example, in the collocates of the word; we have the collocation 'beautiful rose', but not 'strong rose'. How-

ever, we can now ask ourselves whether roses cannot be considered as 'strong' (they do, after all, have sharp thorns to protect themselves), and we can also ask ourselves whether only women, and not men, can be 'beautiful'? And it is this type of questioning of the accepted and conventional norms of language that leads us out of Peirce's Secondness mode of being and perception and into that of Thirdness.

Thirdness has been described by Peirce in various ways ; however, I would like to concentrate on his notion of Thirdness as 'synthesis'. By 'synthesis' is meant the coming together of Firstness and Secondness. And, indeed, it seems logical that the two should come together ; it is not possible for most of us to remain constantly isolated from the real world in a solely Firstness state of heightened sensitivity towards everything around us ; neither is it healthy for us to be constantly in a state of Secondness type action and interaction. It is also inadvisable to jump between the two without some sort of overall framework that lets us understand where we are and where we're jumping to. Thirdness, I would suggest, provides this framework.

In Thirdness, the mind synthesises Firstness and Secondness. What does this mean in more concrete terms? Returning to our rose, Thirdness means the state where we are not only able to appreciate the immediate sense of a rose (as beautiful? as strong? as both beautiful and strong?) but that we can also see the difference among the various different namings of roses - we can view a rose from our own cultural perspective and from that of others, and we can also appreciate that, basically, we are all still talking about what is essentially the exact same thing. This synthetic type of intercultural understanding is especially important in that it not only allows us to notice and appreciate basic points of similarity between our own and different cultures, but it also helps us to understand better our own culturally influenced perspectives. Being able to understand and synthesise different cultural perspectives allows for a more objective standpoint from which to assess our own cultural and individual views. In Bakhtin's term, it allows for a "dialogue" that transcends the barriers of individual cultures and leads to a fuller appreciation of our own culture through the eyes of the other.

Peircean semeiotics in the language and culture class

The starting point of this paper was the application of Peircean theory to the teaching of language and culture in the classroom. I would now like to make more explicit some of what I consider to be the major benefits of introducing the notions of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness as guiding principles of the language and culture class.

First, encouraging students to develop a Firstness type of immediate sensory reaction to aspects of both their own and other cultures not only helps heighten the students' general artistic sensitivities but also helps break down cultural barriers and prejudices. Rather than having students consider an aspect of a foreign culture as an artifact that highlights difference between the students' own and the other culture, a Firstness type approach encourages the students to view aspects of foreign culture as being of immediate significance and of direct relevance to themselves and to their own lives. A

Firstness approach, in other words, encourages the students to respond to aspects of a foreign culture in the same abductive, sensory way they respond to aspects of their own culture, and this creates a basic level understanding of and emotional bond with the foreign culture that militates against cultural bias and prejudice.

Secondness applied in the language and culture classroom would be the development in students of the understanding that an item of language and of culture (or a 'sign', to use semiotic terminology) does not only possess an inherent Firstness type of meaning, but many other multiple and varied meanings when placed in relation to other signs. This opens the way to an understanding of how meaning is created in context and of how meaning can be expanded and manipulated by the use of such devices as irony, contrast, and metaphor. It also develops a sense of how every linguistic and cultural choice has effects and consequences, and this paves the way for an understanding of the larger social and ideological frameworks within which these choices are made. The Secondness type approach, linked as it is to real-world, physical force and to polar type reaction and reaction, allows for an inductive style of teaching that leads students, by the juxtaposition of alternative language and cultural choices, to their own formulation of the rules and systems of rules that govern these choices.

Thirdness may be considered as the students' own realisation of the interrelatedness of the Firstness and Secondness types of meaning and reactions, and the understanding of how the different language and culture signs work within the wider linguistic, social, and cultural frameworks that assign them meaning. The teacher can facilitate the development of this synthetic type of understanding by leading the students through Firstness and Secondness based activities, and also by raising student awareness of how meaning comes to be assigned by these wider contextual frameworks. Whereas Secondness lends itself to an inductive approach, with the students coming to their own realisation of rules or patterns based on their observation of signs, a Thirdness based teaching approach may be considered more deductive in that it starts out from the more general patterns and works towards the actual instances of use in the language or culture under study.

Conclusion

From the above, it would seem that the implementation of Peircean theory involves three different and conflicting classroom approaches: the first based on an abductive, sensory reaction; the second adopting an inductive, 'example to rule' direction; and the third advocating the opposite 'rule to use' deductive standpoint. Here, however, it is important to note that Peirce's theory is a *viewpoint*, not a method. This means that, although the basic guiding principles remain the same, it can be implemented in different ways. This flexibility allows for a much more diverse and richer classroom approach than that afforded by the adoption of any single method. Also, the key word in Peircean theory is *synthesis*. None of the three aspects of Peirce's theory can be taken in isolation; all should be viewed as different but integral facets of the complex social and cultural processes whereby meaning is created in language. Indeed, perhaps a main benefit of this more encompassing semiotic viewpoint is that it would free the language and culture class of the over simplistic gener-

alisations that have tended to characterise it within the contrastive framework of the past two decades. The contrastive approach, with its narrow emphasis on difference to the neglect of similarity, has tended to exaggerate points of difficulty between cultures, and this to a certain extent has aggravated rather than solved problems of intercultural communication through language. Peircean theory, with its basis in *synthesis*, the *coming together* of elements, perhaps offers a more promising base from which to approach these problems.

References

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