

Language layers: knowledge, understanding or interpretation

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Abstract

Two issues basic to any inquiry into the nature of human knowledge are how language contributes to our understanding of the world, and how our beliefs about the world inform our understanding of the language. So, anyone concerned with the nature of human communication and those concerned with the teaching of language, inevitably, figure large in such a group. Therefore, the main assumption within the issue is that language consists, at least, of a set of forms which can be described at various levels: sounds, word, sentence formation and

discourse structure associated with some aspects of meaning. However, it is proper to discuss a language not as a collection of texts, grammars and dictionaries but as a vehicle of communication. The paper, in this vein, interrogates the availability of a simple ‘correct’ interpretation of an utterance where listeners have to make an effort to work out what speakers mean by what they say. There is a belief that interpretation is a difficult and risky process with no guarantee of a satisfactory outcome, even if you have correctly identified the words and

correctly worked out the syntactic structure of the sentence.

Key Words: language layers, language teaching, understanding, human communication, discourse interpretation

1.1. Introduction

Someone might claim that understanding an utterance is a simple matter of linguistic decoding. In cases of someone speaking to us in English; it might be claimed that all we need to understand him/her is knowledge of English. Virtually, any utterance can be used to show that this hypothesis is wrong: here we leave aside cases of accidental information transmission (being nervous, showing sympathy or empathy, ...) and look instead at the domain of intentional communication and understanding (often involving a degree of manipulation and concealment). Yet, there is a gap

between knowing what a sentence of English means and understanding all what a speaker intends to communicate by uttering it on a given occasion. So, communication and understanding involve more than mere linguistic encoding and decoding

1.2. The Forms of Language

Most of the research take for granted a neutral form of English which is always easily identified in its written form a “Standard English”. The only research paper which confronts the issues raised in trying to determine what the term ‘language’ might refer to in the case of English is Milroy’s. She shows difficulty in finding criteria for identifying ‘Standard English’ particularly in the spoken form. Such evidence is given through the diversity of forms encountered between native speakers

themselves where understanding can be imperiled. However, the problems which native speakers encounter in understanding each other are likely to be compounded if one of the interlocutors is a foreign learner.

The neutral form assumed, is probably not identical for all writers, since each person's construct 'language' must be, to some extent, an individual construct. For Milroy, a language is not a monolith but a complex network of variants in constant flux. What makes a language that particular language is as much a social as a linguistic question, strikingly so in the case of accents and dialects. Expressions may serve to carry their users' messages, but they also carry social values.

The use of a particular form contributes to a particular meaning by laying down clues which the attentive listener or reader will

pick up and use in the search for an interpretation. Both Brown and Short examine particular areas of form-meaning relationships; however Brown is concerned with examining the range of syntactic forms available for expressing a range of semantic relationships, whereas Short is concerned with explaining the effect of a particular stylistic choice in a particular context, and with showing that the effect of these choices is just as pervasive in language at large as it is in the language of literature.

Milroy's insistence that language carries social values is certainly a view which would be shared by Aitchison, whose paper documents how the values associated with the culture of a speaker's native language are carried over into the foreign language and culture. Learners of a foreign language bring to the new language taxonomies of their own

language, so their judgment of their prototypical categories of familiar lexical fields (animals, vegetables, furniture, on so on) are strikingly different from judgment made by native speakers. In a rather form, a similar view is expressed by Bialystok who considers the process of learning a second/foreign language to be quite unlike that of learning the first language. The reason is that in learning the first language the child learns not only that particular language, but language more generally conceived. Learning the first language is a cognitive problem which involves the acquisition of a cognitive system. The resulting abstract representation of the basic categories of language, the acquired conceptual system, and the ability to analyse and categorize, are all available in learning a second language, a process which Bialystok suggests is

confined to learning the linguistic details of the new language. As Aitchison points out, the new language may be used by the learner to communicate ideas which are typically different from those available to native speakers of that language.

1.3. Language and Understanding

Whereas the range of views expressed on the nature of language can, so far, all be seen as complementary, at first sight there does appear to be a diversity in the different conceptions of the relationship between language and understanding. Milroy, for instance, again focuses centrally on an issue that is only dealt with peripherally in other papers, and that is the issue of social meaning expressed by the choice of forms of language, particularly in speech. Speakers define their membership of particular social groups by using

forms which are peculiar to them, and in choosing a form which includes them as members of the group, they exclude others from it. These subtle social meanings are quite hard even for native speakers from distant areas to pick up, and are typically difficult for non-native speakers.

The notion of understanding emerging as a function of the social group in which it is embedded also surfaces in the work of Brumfit. He assumed that the desired outcome of the interaction which takes place between learners and teacher in the culture created in the classroom is the understanding of the language being taught and learnt. He focuses on the types of conditions most favourable to achieving the desired outcome. Here sociocultural conditions are considered of paramount importance in directing the search for mutual understanding which is

held to be the key to foreign language learning. Brumfit's account of understanding is that it is a basically social process. In a sense understanding is seen as a social institution where meaning is constructed in classroom setting and the members of the class participate in that meaning. In other words, it is like a bank owned by a social co-operative, from which contributors can borrow and to which they can contribute. This often leads to a conception that meaning is 'negotiated' between participants in an interaction. In this vein, De Saussure ascribes the following:

If we could embrace the sum of word-images stored in the minds of all individuals, we could identify the social bond that constitutes language. It is a storehouse filled by the members of a given community through their active use of speaking, a

grammatical system that has a potential existence in each brain, or, more specifically, in the brains of a group of individuals. For language is not complete in any speaker; it exists perfectly only within a collectivity. (De Saussure, 1960:13)

In sum, although many of the research conducted pay lip-service to the complementarity view of the social and cognitive approaches to the study of language, applied linguistics still tends to put emphasis on language as a social institution. However, the discipline will be impoverished if it fails to take account of research into the cognitive aspects of language learning and language understanding.

1.4. Diversities of Understanding

As soon as we accept that communication is a risky undertaking, requiring not simply

the exchange of linguistically packaged ideas, but an effort of imagination on the part of the reader or listener, we can see why it is that the same message can be interpreted by listeners in different ways. The issue of diversity in understanding is explicitly raised in most of the papers, and dealt with at length by both Brumfit and Spolsky. Spolsky points to the variability of interpretation of the ‘same’ text according to who is doing the interpreting—test writers, test takers, or examiners—and according to the number of times the text is read or heard. The question of ‘what a text means’ is crucial to language testing, and yet, as Spolsky remarks, since so many social and cognitive aspects are involved in comprehension, over and above decoding the familiar linguistic categories, it is hard to be sure what it is that a test is measuring.

It is hard enough to be sure of what are the relevant processes when testing native speakers working in their own language. It is even more difficult if they are working in a foreign language. Bialystok argues that what is crucial here is control of the input, to ensure that it is compatible with the learner's mental representation of the language at each stage of the learning process. This requires that teachers be able to analyse the demands that different types of task make upon the learner. Brown in her paper suggests that one parameter which teachers would do well to consider in this context is the different level of cognitive demands made by texts in different genres.

Once again, these diverse contributors appear to entertain compatible views on the issue of interpretation.

1.5. Language in Context

Throughout these papers runs a common theme: that language is understood in context. Milroy and Brumfit are concerned with different aspects of the social, interactional context in which language is experienced. Brown discusses the way in which the choice of particular verbs sets up specific configurations of semantic roles which characterize prototypical contexts, which then bring other aspects of such contexts in their train. Thus, if the verb "BUY" is used to describe an action of John's, it creates the context of a 'commercial exchange' which makes available other roles such as a seller, the price paid, the money used in payment, the object bought, and so on.

The only paper to address some of these problems of context directly is that of **Wilson**, who suggests that the listener activates no more context than is necessary

to understand the utterance and that, rather than taking account of external features of context before and during the utterance, the listener only activates the necessary amount of context after having heard the utterance. The theory propounded in this paper has raised great interest because of the bold nature of the claims that it makes about cognitive processing, and it has generated animated discussion in a variety of fields.

Of all the areas we have discussed, that of understanding language in context is the one which may be seen as at once the most crucial to language teaching and the most controversial. In general, the other views put forward, although diverse in their origin, can be seen as remarkably compatible with each other, complementary rather than in conflict.

It is frequently possible to achieve an adequate interpretation of well contextualized instructions or directions, even if you have a limited grasp of the meaning of what was said. Where the listener has doubts about how to proceed, what is crucially important is that learners are able (and have enough) to indicate where they do not understand, and to persist in requests for repetition or clarification. Such strategies can be learnt and practiced in the classroom, ideally using a model of the range of options available to the speaker for furthering the listener's understanding—elaboration, modification, deletion, addition, paraphrase, summarizing, and so on.

1.6. Understanding in Classroom

In the same line of thought, Edwards and Mercer (1987) attempt to show that 'common

knowledge' is constructed through pedagogic interaction in classrooms. In due course, they go further to show that 'Overt messages are only a small part of the total communication...context and continuity are essential considerations in the study of discourse'. Context, as they define it, consists of any elements invoked by any participant, and consequently 'participants' conceptions of each other's mental contexts may be wrong or, more likely, only partially right...any physical set of circumstances could lend itself to an infinity of possible shared conceptions and relevance's'. Thus, 'context' connects with one of the key problems in interpretation: recognizing the cultural relationships between what is referred to, as well as the linguistic relationships between elements in the linguistic system. Speech does not consist only of linguistic items,

and all speakers carry not only the language system, but also everything to which the language refers in their lexicon. It is not all the words that are in dispute, but all the potential associations of the concepts to which the words refer. In so far as concepts are socially constructed, words and meanings will have multiple relationships, and the points of contact will constantly shift over time, across speakers and according to perceived addressor-addressee conventions within the repertoire of a single speaker. Thus, as ever, it seems easier to demonstrate the impossibility of communication than the possibility.

But this paradox is resolvable by recognizing the early stated point of diversity when interpreting. Communication does not consist of identical aims, identically formulated. Identity confuses the issue.

Communication occurs as a reflection of individuals' willingness to stay in contact with each other and some of the mechanisms for doing so can be charted. This is task of teachers in classrooms. Teachers create a joint context for educational activities. A major means of doing this is to create a common, shared knowledge, relying on an implicit framework which is created in the classroom.

Learners rely on educational ground rules with both cognitive and social functions. These incorporate both social conventions for the presentation of knowledge and sets of procedures for solving problems. But they tend to remain implicit, and they are rarely brought into the open. Further some of the knowledge required from the learners is routinized and ritualized, with other knowledge, no so

constrained in its functions, relies on principles for explanation and reflection. In further circumstances, Edwards and Mercer emphasize the tension between the needs to induct children into an "established, ready-made culture «and to develop "creative and autonomous participants in a culture which is not ready-made but continually in the making" (1987:164).

A major question will raise itself after such concluding ideas. Where would this argument lead us in considering understanding in the learning of a foreign language? It would primarily lead us to ask whether context would be exploited more fully, whether failure to understand was attributable to the inadequacy of the referential framework provided in class. Here, Edwards and Mercer put it clearly as follows; *good teaching will be*

reflective, sensitive to the possibility of different kinds of understanding (Edwards & Mercer 1987:167). In EFL language classroom the nature of differing understanding for particular cultural and linguistic groups will become crucially important, if teachers are to develop the necessary sensitivity to individual needs.

This argument also has implications for applied linguistics, as for psychological research. The value of experimentation, or of formally structured non-real world encounters, will be much less than the value of studies of situated discourse, both in and out of school. The development of shared understanding rather than shared linguistic systems will become a much more important object of study, and the emphasis will have to be on knowledge as a process rather than as a body of

static information. This will be particularly important if we are to avoid learners simply engaging in an apparently arbitrary process. The comments made by Edwards and Mercer on classrooms' understanding will be instantly recognizable to teachers of foreign languages. In this vein they commented, "*For many pupils, learning from teachers must to be a mysterious and arbitrary difficult process, the solution to which may be to concentrate on trying to do and say what appears to be expected*" (ibid.;169). In contrast, the effort to relate the individual to the social, seeing the relationship between creative interpretation and social convention as the central content of learning, is compatible with what we know of language learning processes in natural circumstances. But the understanding that is thus being developed arises out of the personal histories of class and

teacher, and out of the provisional nature of every group-made text, as well as out of the individual contribution of each learner. The language forms that lead to idealizations by linguists will provide snapshots of speech events only, and snapshots cannot illustrate real-time processes. Because meaning is developed in real time and because classrooms operate with meaning across time, so education forces us to re-examine our concept of context.

1.7. **Relevance and Understanding**

For the past thirty years at least, applied linguists and teachers of English have talked about the importance of ‘understanding language in context’. It is often unclear what is meant by context. In the 1960s, the fashion was to construct taxonomies of external features of context (such as speaker, hearer, place and time of

utterance, genre, etc.) often modeled on the works of Hymes. The well-known problem with such taxonomies is how, in principle, to determine which of the indeterminately large number of possibly relevant facets of any particular feature is the one which is actually relevant to the interpretation of a particular utterance. For instance, all such taxonomies include a ‘speaker’ feature: the facets of this feature which might be relevant on a particular occasion could include the identity of the speaker, his/her profession, age, height, nationality, degree of education, family, colour of eyes/hair, etc., clothing, political affiliation, state of health. Each facet reveals sub-facets. The classic problem in making such ‘features of context’ do any work in giving an account of communication has been how to constrain the explosion of potentially relevant information.

More recently, applied linguists have turned to later theories which have attempted to show how features of the context other than those involving external features contribute to understanding language. These include 'speech act' theories deriving from the work of Austin (1962), 'mutual knowledge' theories, from the work of Smith (1982); theories of knowledge representation which appeal to notions like 'frame', 'script', and 'scenario' (in Brown and Yule 1983), and most significant of all for relevance theory, the 'co-operative principle' and its aspects. Here, we will leave all of the accidental information transmission (certain facts about the speaker leading to a given interpretation in the light of certain assumptions) and look instead at the domain of intentional communication and understanding.

Often intentional communication involves a degree of manipulation and maturation. Like many politicians, especially, a speaker at an official occasion is doing his best to appear more intelligent, more sympathetic, and more knowledgeable than he really is. These intentions can only succeed if they remain hidden: obviously if we realize that the speaker wants us to think that he is nicer than he is, we are not going to be deceived. Let's leave aside these cases of covert communication and concentrate instead on a more basic overt type of communication which we all engage in every time we speak. In overt communication, there are no hidden intentions. The speaker wants to convey a certain message, is actively helping the hearer to recognize it, and would acknowledge it if asked.

In sum, the purpose of this paper analysis is to dive in the idea that communication is meant to show overt, intentional communication, and understanding to mean recovering the overtly intended interpretation. Someone might claim that understanding an utterance is a simple matter of linguistic decoding. Virtually any utterance can be used to show that this hypothesis is wrong. There is a gap between knowing what a sentence of English means and understand all that a speaker intends to communicate by uttering it on a given occasion. Communication and understanding involve more than mere linguistic encoding and decoding; and, relevance and understanding are two sides of the same coin. What is communicated generally goes well beyond what is linguistically encoded.

1.8. Conclusion

A hearer is in similar situation to someone trying to complete a partially solved crossword puzzle: a few pieces of a word are likely to be in place, but the rest has to be guessed with the help of diverse clues. It is obvious that context or background assumptions play a crucial role in deciphering a message; however, this decoding clue can emerge from cultural or scientific knowledge, common-sense assumptions, and, more generally, any item of shared or idiosyncratic information that the hearer has access to at the time.

As far as F.L. learning is concerned, the gap between linguistic accounts of language understanding and their application in pedagogical programmes, remains a large one. At the word level, the crucial question in F. L. learning is whether the learner knows the

word at all. At the syntactic level, there are interesting questions about the universality of the parsing principles. At the discourse level, a wealth of evidence points to the importance of background knowledge, both general and specific to the topic of the current conversation or text, in language understanding.

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