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Reading Comprehension or Test-Taking Strategies?

Pablo Sosa²

Abstract

The article seeks to explore the manner in which reading comprehension is taught and evaluated in translation and interpretation courses in college. It argues that syllabi are designed to foster a binary interpretation of texts based on the underlying belief of language as a transparent medium. This view not only contradicts post-structuralist theories which have been in effect for over 40 years, but, more importantly, it goes against the current concept of the translator/interpreter's role as a linguistic mediator. The article exemplifies the incongruent interpretation of a paragraph which may be typical in international tests and in the language classroom in order to show how a closed reading fosters under-interpretation. Implicit in this view is also the idea that this form of reading is ultimately designed to maintain a power structure which is not meant to be challenged. The article proposes a more open approach to teaching reading activities.

Keywords: teaching reading, translator, college, post-structuralism.

Resumen:

El siguiente artículo intenta explorar la manera en la cual se enseña la comprensión de textos en las carreras de traducción e interpretación. Se arguye que los programas están diseñados para producir una interpretación binaria del texto basándose en el concepto de la lengua como un medio transparente. Esto no solo contradice las teorías postestructuralistas en vigencia durante los últimos 40 años, sino también, y aún más importante, va en contra de las actuales teorías del rol del traductor/intérprete como mediador lingüístico. El artículo ejemplifica la interpretación incongruente de un párrafo típico en los exámenes internacionales y en el aula de inglés a fin de demostrar cómo una lectura cerrada lleva a una subinterpretación. Implícito en este acercamiento al texto se encuentra el diseño de manutención de una estructura de poder que no debe ser desafiada. El presente artículo propone un acercamiento más abierto al texto.

Palabras claves: enseñanza de lectura de texto, traductor, nivel universitario, postestructuralismo.

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Introduction

Since the 1970s, with the appearance of post-structuralist theory, there has been much debate on the acts of reading and writing. This discussion, however, seems to have passed unnoticed in the construction of reading and writing activities in English books and, more specifically, in the design of English language syllabi for courses in translation and interpretation. Moreover, the reading activities in these courses are centered on guided questions which seem to be founded upon an underlying theory of language as a transparent medium, the author as an unfaltering figure and the reader as a passive recipient of information. For, if the typology of the questions formulated in English texts is examined, it reveals closed questions meant to elicit a specific response without any room for variants; that is to say, the questions are of the true/false, fill in the blanks, or multiple choice types. Most textbooks later suggest a discussion which will be based on the hermeneutics prescribed by the previous activities.

The issue at hand, thus, deals with the construction of reading activities within a syllabus meant to deploy a more constructive reading on the part of students enrolled in translation or interpretation courses, which will have as a theoretical framework the theories set forth by post-structuralist thinkers. In a word, this paper will analyze how it may be possible to open the text for students in such a manner as to make way for a multiplicity of “interpretations” and to free the classroom of the judgment of a totalizing discourse which is offered by the authors of English books.

Context

How we learn to approach the text has dire implications on the role of translators and interpreters today. Ostensibly, the role of these professionals is being seen more and more as a mediator than as a “walking dictionary”. Concretely, this implies that society is requiring people who are able to empathize with the producer of the oral or written text in order to interpret the social and cultural implications embedded in his/her language. In fact, many professionals today are being hired as linguistic mediators between two parties who share the same second language but not the same cultural assumptions (de Ortúzar, 2014).

Now, then, the issue is how the translator or interpreter can be asked to disambiguate a text which is inherently ambiguous if the reading skills he/she has acquired have the underlying assumption that language is transparent and that the author has clear intentions which crystalize in the text. There are no multiple choice questions to serve as a guide, nor are there true or false statements which can be applied simply because the text is subject to multiple readings. At best, the professional may express the ambiguity and explain the source of this ambiguity if necessary. The rendering of one specific interpretation in order to close the text—which will nevertheless lay open—will invariably lead to an under-interpretation.

Theoretical Framework

The underlying foundations for the critical analysis set forth in this article concern post-structural theories which see the text as an open intertwining of positions and layers of meaning. In this sense, Lodge (2000), on discussing Iser's reader response theory, states that "the text is open to infinity: no reader, no subject, no science can arrest the text" (p. 151). These theories see meaning as a convergence of text and reader which creates indeterminacy because the text has "gaps" or "blanks" that the reader has to fill. In fact, Iser (2000) explains that sentences are connected in such a way that they create correlations and subtle connections from which meaning may be construed (pp. 193-194). This does not mean that all meanings are possible, because the reader has to accept certain givens that create a "world" within a text, but it is the reader who establishes the "interrelations between past, present and future, [which] actually causes the text to reveal its potential multiplicity of connections" (Iser, 2000, p. 192). This means that the reading process "always involves viewing the text through a perspective that is continually on the move" (Iser, 2000, p. 194). This forces the reader to experience a reality—a world—which is different from his/her own.

Furthermore, according to Lodge's reading of Roland Barthes' S/Z there is "a distinction between the '*lisible*' or '*readerly*' classic text, which makes its readers passive consumers, and the '*scriptible*' or '*writerly*' modern text, which invites the readers to an active participation in the production of meanings that are infinite and inexhaustible" (Lodge, 2000, p. 146). In this sense, the concept of reading has undergone a drastic change since the mid-twentieth century. The idea of a text today

implies a multi-dimensional space where “innumerable centers of culture clash” (Barthes, 2000, p. 149). Thus, the complex layerings of the contextual elements which are infinite all contribute to create meaning.

Finally, Barthes (2000) goes further in his analysis and reveals that “to close the writing [is] a conception [which] suits criticism very well” (p. 149). This shows that a conception of writing—and thus reading—benefits a certain power structure with certain ideas of language as a transparent system of signifiers that ultimately allows certain groups to wield power.

Application

To illustrate the point, there follows a paragraph taken from a CAE mock exam website within *PART 3: COMPREHENSION MULTIPLE CHOICE* section:

Private schools are enormously expensive, as much as £18,000 a year for a boarder at somewhere like Eton or Harrow to at least £8,000 a year almost everywhere. Why are parents, many of whom are not wealthy or even comfortably off, willing to sacrifice so much in the cause of their children's schooling? One father replied to this question by saying: "Everything is on the margin. If my son gets a five per cent better chance of going to university, that may be the difference between success and failure." You can believe him if you like, but £50,000 minimum is a lot to pay for a five per cent better chance. Most children, given the choice, would take the money. The real reason parents fork out the cash is prejudice: they don't want little Henry mixing with the workers, or getting his accent wrong. And anyway, at your next dinner party it won't sound too good if all the guests are sending their kids to St Swotting-by-the-Sea, and you say your kid is going to the state school down the road even if, as a result, you are able to serve Château Margaux with the filet steak. (www.englishspeaker.com)

All the multiple choice questions cannot be shown due to the constrictions of this paper, but in order to illustrate, one will be reproduced below:

03. Parents most often send their children to private school
A. for social reasons

- B. for a margin of success
- C. to show how much money they have
- D. to pass university entrance examinations

Most readers might agree that the “correct” answer is “A”. They might have arrived at this response because it is the answer that is most explicit in the text. However, the other answers may be viable for, in fact, it may be inferred that social success seems to depend upon passing a university examination. Further, going to a private school seems dependent upon the margin of success achieved by passing. Even more, all this seems to be done in order to show how much money they have. Thus, the choice an applicant makes will depend upon the level of abstraction he/she makes.

What seems even more troubling is that no paratextual elements appear on the page: there is no author named, no mention of how the alleged research was carried out, and no information about whether this is in fact a published article. This creates limitations on the context, which is crucial for understanding.

Furthermore, this type of article does not recognize a central unifying force—the author—, implying the proposition that its views are universal. This is especially biased, since these reading tests are geared for applicants from all over the world whose cultural assumptions differ greatly. The issue is that the “world” presented in the text assumes that success is equal to wealth, which may be a cultural assumption in some countries but not in all; in some cultures but not in others; for some people, but not for everyone.

Interestingly, the text seems to bear a sarcastic tone given by such markers as “St Swotting-by-the-Sea” and “Château Margaux.” It is here that the author is present and opinionated, but this fact is never actually foregrounded. The detection of this tone will depend upon what the reader brings to the reading experience. It seems, however, that a discussion on the topic is not sought.

Another interesting case arises from the reading of certain literary texts. One such case is a paragraph which appears in Cormac McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses*:

That night he dreamt of horses in a field on a high plain where the spring rains had brought up the grass and the wildflowers out of the ground and the flowers ran all blue and yellow far as the eye could see and in the dream he was among the horses running and in the dream he himself could run with the horses and they coursed the young

mares and fillies over the plain where their rich bay and their rich chestnut colors shone in the sun and the young colts ran with their dams and trampled down the flowers in a haze of pollen that hung in the sun like powdered gold and they ran he and the horses out along the high mesas where the ground resounded under their running hooves and they flowed and changed and ran and their manes and tails blew off of them like spume and there was nothing else at all in that high world and they moved all of them in a resonance that was like a music among them and they were none of them afraid horse nor colt nor mare and they ran in that resonance which is the world itself and which cannot be spoken but only praised. (McCarthy, 1993, pp. 161-162)

This beautiful one-sentence paragraph challenges the reader in many ways; that is, we could ask why it is written in only one sentence where the different clauses are joined by “and”, or why the narrator has chosen to use a certain poetic register, or what the dream involving horses means, or what the philosophical implications might be, and the list of topics for discussion could be infinite for this text which, like most others, defies a single view of analysis.

Implications

The issue is if the students we are training in translation and interpretation courses are prepared to meet this challenge. It seems that the type of questions students are trained to respond will disturb the opening of the text because the text itself is not concerned with binary oppositions or restricted choices. Therefore, what is proposed is that teachers in these courses allow for a larger array of responses, both aesthetic and rational, and that they emphasize the fact that each response should offer solid support, an analysis of the coherence that the author has resorted to in his/her rhetoric, and the special semantic and structural markers that define a certain point of view.

Resistance to this mode of working with the text seems to come from a certain complacency that many teachers find in single-minded interpretations and the comfort of being able to rely on a “correct” interpretation to avoid dealing with the multiple layers that the text represents. This analysis implies that there is a need to wield power from a unifying position which is not to be challenged, when it is in fact this challenge that makes reading worthwhile and actually teaches students to utilize multiple skills

and strategies to learn to view life from the perspective of another person and enrich their own universe.

Conclusions

In conclusion, there seems to be some complacency on the part of many people who design syllabi in translation and interpretation courses when it comes to approaching the written or oral text. This complacency comes from the underlying belief that language is a transparent medium and, thus, that the text is a closed system whose interpretation is given by the writer, editors or publishers. Furthermore, implied in this complacency is the fear of opening the text and losing the power that a unified interpretation provides.

Moreover, the idea of language as a transparent medium teaches students that there can be only one correct answer in the translation process. This is not only narrow-minded but also harmful to students, who acquire a binary mode of reasoning that is far from the openness that today's professionals require. Therefore, training students to treat the text and the producer as open entities worth discovering is not only a way of making the experience of reading more meaningful, but also of helping students make better choices in their professional lives.

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