LITERATURE IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Annotation: The article discusses the use of literature in teaching language, specifically phonetics and syntax. It is suggested that George Bernard Shaw's play Pygmalion, and its film adaptation My Fair Lady, can serve as a starting point for exploring accents, dialects, and other phonetic topics. In terms of syntax, the author suggests using examples from literature, including George Orwell's essays, to illustrate various syntactic structures.

Key words: literature, phonetics, syntax, accent, dialect, structure, teaching

When I was studying Latin and Greek at school, my tutor used to tell a story which was intended, I think, to illustrate how much more interesting his classes were than the ones he had to endure when he was my age. His teacher had introduced a new text with the unpromising claim: "This term, we will be studying Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, a veritable treasure-house of grammatical abnormalities."

This may not be the most scintillating anecdote, though students tend to be grateful for any comment that provides some respite from their study of Greek grammar, but it illustrates a point worth emphasizing. We now assume that grammar and syntax are worth studying principally as an aid to communication and interpretation. We study the grammar so that we can read the literature. In the old days, they would study the literature to learn the grammar.

This dichotomy became relevant to me earlier this year when I accepted a job teaching in the Department of English Philology at the Korea International University of Fergana. I took the job mainly because I wanted to live and work in Uzbekistan, a country which had overwhelmed me with its historic splendour and natural beauty on earlier visits. There was only one slight difficulty: I am no linguist. My undergraduate degree is in Latin, Greek, ancient history and philosophy. My doctorate is in Victorian literature. When I was interviewed for the job, one of the committee pointed this out and asked: "Wouldn't you get bored teaching phonetics and syntax to

second-language students?" My answer, whatever it was, must have been convincing enough to pass muster, but he had a point.

I started to think about how I could follow in the footsteps of the mediaeval grammarians who used literature to teach language. In the case of phonetics, the answer was obvious, since one of the best-known plays of the twentieth century is about a professor of phonetics attempting to teach his student to speak standard English. In George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Professor Henry Higgins makes a wager with his friend Colonel Pickering that he can pass off a girl who sells flowers on the corner of Tottenham Court Road as a duchess at an embassy ball by teaching her to speak clearly and euphoniously in the accent of the English aristocracy. The celebrated film version, *My Fair Lady*, starring Audrey Hepburn and Rex Harrison, includes various scenes in which Higgins attempts to modify Liza's pronunciation using the paraphernalia of the speech scientist.

Of course, one cannot learn phonetics simply by reading *Pygmalion* or watching *My Fair Lady*, but both text and film make excellent points of departure for exploring accents and dialects, diphthongs and triphthongs, fricatives and affricates, rhythm, intonation, stress, and a host of other topics. Reading the play allows students to practice their own pronunciation. The diction of Rex Harrison and, in the second part of the film, Audrey Hepburn, provides them with reliable models for imitation. In the first part of the film, Hepburn demonstrates what not to do.

Bernard Shaw had a long-standing interest in phonetics and spelling reform but no one, as far as I know (though I am happy to be corrected and enlightened), has ever written a great play, novel or poem about syntax. In this area, my aim has been to find the best models for students to follow. George Orwell, who wrote that good prose is like a window pane, meaning that one ought not to see the writing itself but look straight through it at the subject, is one of the best exemplars of the plain style in English. Orwell is often considered primarily as a political writer, but his essays cover a wide range of topics, from literature to cookery to the common toad, with vigorous, pellucid clarity. He is also an astute commentator on the writing of others.

In 'Politics and the English Language', for instance, he eviscerates numerous examples of pompous, verbose, stale, feeble writing before providing one of his own:

Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account.

This is a vague, lifeless version of a well-known verse in Ecclesiastes, for which the Authorised Version of the Bible uses the following words:

I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

Despite the occasional archaism, the clear concrete language of the sentence from four centuries ago is far easier to grasp than the flaccid twentieth-century version, whether or not English happens to be your first language. Bad examples are at least as useful as good ones in proving a point as well as in developing students' own writing, and this particular comparison illustrates the importance of visual imagery, as well as showing that a long word is often inferior to a short one.

At the most elementary level, one can illustrate every syntactic structure students need to learn with a plethora of examples from literature. This is clearly more interesting than using dull examples from textbooks and, unless you are consistently very creative, probably better than writing your own examples. It restores the link between form and content, which reminds students of why they are going through the difficult experience of learning a new language in the first place.

This reminder can be just as salutary for the teacher as it is for the student. I have spent much of my life reading and teaching great literature because I love it, but this scarcely means that every class I have taught has been filled with excitement and discovery, either for me or for my students. To some extent, this is inevitable: learning and teaching are hard work. In the study of literature in another language, the division between pleasure and pain is all too often precisely a linguistic one. One

thrills to the exploits of Odysseus, some of the most exciting stories ever written. Then one has to buckle down and pore over dictionaries, lexicons, and books of grammar to make sense of Homeric Greek.

However, the fact that learning a language is hard work, and not every lesson can be an experience of untrammeled joy, does not mean that one should lose sight of the objectives. The point of language is to communicate; to break down or at least penetrate through some of the barriers that divide us from one another. As Wittgenstein put it in the *Tractatus*, "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world", or as the Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi wrote more than two thousand years earlier:

Zhuangzi and Huizi were strolling along the dam of the Hao River when Zhuangzi said, "See how the minnows come out and dart around where they please! That's what fish really enjoy!" Huizi said, "You are not a fish, how do you know what fish enjoy?" Zhuangzi said, "You are not me, so how do you know that I don't know what fish enjoy?"

We may well presume that fish do not enjoy being yanked out of the water on the end of a line, but who can doubt that fishing would be much less popular if they were able to tell us so. The linguistic barrier between man and fish is absolute and impenetrable, but the barriers between man and man, or woman and woman, or even woman and man are permeable even if they cannot be destroyed altogether. This communication requires effort, meaning that one must be selective.

Literature allows a reader to learn from some of the cleverest, most thoughtful, and most talented people who ever lived. When you think about it, the sheer magnificence of what is on offer is little short of miraculous. It is not only the fact that you can read the stories and the reflections of Sophocles or Aristotle or Virgil or Dante or Shakespeare or Milton or George Eliot. These people, and a host of others, dedicated their lives to communicating what they had to say as perfectly as anyone could say it. More than this: the range of reading now possible is vast. Dante never read Sophocles, let alone Zhuangzi or Murasaki or the Epic of Gilgamesh. You can

read all of them, along with many more texts created by writers across a vast range of time, place, and culture.

There is an obvious objection to this focus on literature in the teaching of language, which will certainly have occurred to you by now. The language student is not learning merely to absorb, but to communicate on her own account: speaking and writing are just as important as listening and reading. This, however, is just what the mediaeval students who studied literature to learn grammar were doing. The grammatical structures they learned were for use in their own compositions. Greek and Latin prose composition are dying arts nowadays, while verse composition is as dead as a coffin-nail, yet for hundreds of years these skills were the mainstay of education in Europe.

Here we return to the importance of models, and the reason why I have started my language classes in Uzbekistan with Shaw and Orwell, not with Shakespeare and Milton. The criteria for choosing texts in language-teaching are somewhat different from those one might employ for purely literary purposes. The student is not aspiring, at least initially, to write sonnets or epics. She will gain the most from reading writers she can imitate, and this means that it makes sense to begin with twentieth and twenty-first-century authors who write clearly and vigorously in the plain style.

These writers might not always be the ones the academy would consider literary. I have found that Central and East Asian students are sometimes familiar with thrillers and detective stories, which they have read in their spare time: Agatha Christie, Ian Fleming, or Frederick Forsyth. The great virtue of these writers, and others like them, is that their prose is, as Orwell says, "like a window pane." Readers devour their books quickly for the sake of the plot, and this means that they were compelled to write the sort of sentences that never need to be read twice. However much one might admire more diffuse stylists, one would not wish to present an intermediate student with the sort of prose E.M.Forster so eloquently describes in an essay on Proust:

A sentence begins quite simply, then it undulates and expands, parentheses

intervene like quick-set hedges, the flowers of comparison bloom, and three fields off, like a wounded partridge, crouches the principal verb, making one wonder as one picks it up, poor little thing, whether after all it was worth such a tramp, so many guns, and such expensive dogs, and what, after all, is its relation to the main subject, potted so gaily half a page back, and proving finally to have been in the accusative case.

Perhaps the greatest advantage of using literature in my own language classroom, however, is simply that it is a topic on which I can be genuinely enthusiastic. There is no guarantee that this enthusiasm will be infectious, but to insist that students must care about a subject which bores their teacher is clearly a recipe for disaster. Anyone teaching or lecturing in an English department probably cares about books and appreciates good, great, or even competent and workmanlike writing. It would be a pity not to communicate this to one's students when one has the chance, particularly as this may well be the most apposite, elegant and memorable way of conveying to them what they need to learn.