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LINGUISTIC EXPLORATION OF MODERN POETRY IN AN ESL CLASSROOM

FOR THE TEACHER

A THESIS PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT
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SHARON AVERDENE PHEK HENG PHUA

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PART I

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

At a time of wide-ranging debate about the teaching of English Literature and English Language, particularly in the broader contexts of educational principles and policies, the force and authority of Professor Widdowson's advocacy of approaching literature as discourse has appealed to me. This approach to literature teaching is interested in the ways the elements of the language system are used to create meanings and effects. And it has important pedagogical links, especially at advanced levels. By showing how language works in literary works, we can draw students' attention to the language use as such, as well as to its communicative functions. Such drawing of attention can be useful as an alternative learning strategy while the analytic skills acquired can indirectly lead to greater language skills. I am convinced of these pedagogical advantages and maintain that this linguistic-based approach could well be adopted, especially in ESL situations like those in Singapore.

In other words, the central proposition of this thesis follows the same line of argument as my extended essay for BA Hons (39.499). That is, with the pedagogical implications, the reasons for the study of poetry using a stylistic approach, the criteria governing my selection of texts, and the key linguistic concepts as set up in my 39.499, this thesis is designed to complement the essay and to further substantiate my claims for the place of poetry in the Singapore ESL classrooms (specifically at the college/pre-university level). However, I should point out that references to syntax and related formal features of language do presuppose at least some general acquaintance with the kind of linguistic concepts introduced and discussed in my 39.499. I do not, however, discount the possibility of this thesis being used as samples of lesson plans in

their own right, and hope that each chapter is sufficiently self-contained to allow this.

As a whole, this thesis is designed to cover a good assortment of linguistic concepts for teachers/beginning "practitioners" as sample lesson plans. I have attempted to include texts of wide-ranging themes and interests by both male and female poets across different cultures. This thesis is, however, not designed to be a complete coursebook in itself, as linguistic patternings are dynamic and always changing. The analyses and findings of my selected texts are themselves progressively structured, and ordered according to increasing level of difficulties (from the perspective of my classroom experience) and their inter-textual relatedness. These linguistic analyses and findings could no doubt be improved upon and other poems added. I would like to emphasize that the analysis of each poem is not to be regarded as an end in itself, but as a means of devising a classroom practice and pedagogical awareness of the importance of a linguistic-based reading of texts.

My main objective for this thesis is to suggest a substantial number of poems showing distinctive linguistic features that might be devised to draw the students' attention to how the English Language is used to convey communicative effects in literary work such as poetry. I am not trying to specify a precise set of procedures for the teaching of poetry, as most experienced teachers would readily acknowledge the fact that classroom practices very often do not operate rigidly within prescribed lesson-plans. Above all, it is hoped that my illustrations of how the linguistic approach to poetry might be worked out in practice will give some indication of the potential inherent in the approach, and will motivate the reader to consider how the potential might be more effectively realized in his/her particular classroom setting, bearing in mind other contributing teaching-learning factors for his/her unique audience.

CHAPTER 2

2.1 CLASSROOM PRACTICE: Problems and Difficulties

From my personal experience, although some problems were encountered in my exploration and also the presentation of my findings (this is especially true given the fact that I am a beginning practitioner myself), I am still convinced of the values of a stylistic approach to the study of poetry: at its most fundamental level, the study has helped me to develop a sharper awareness to the efficacy and communicative functions of the English Language.

My conviction has motivated me to try out the findings as proposed in my 39.499 in a Singapore classroom. The targeted audience was the average eighteen year-old college students who in one way or another have been acquainted with the traditional cultural approach to the teaching of literature, since English Literature is a compulsory subject at the lower secondary level. Most significantly, these students have been exposed to, and conditioned by (to a certain extent) the long-standing practice of English Language and English Literature being taught by different teachers and examined as separate subjects in the school curriculum.

Several major problems and difficulties were encountered in the course of my classroom practice using the stylistic approach to poetry as proposed in my 39.499. It is a pity that I could only administer the approach over a rather limited period of time and do not have sufficient data to validate the claim that the intrinsic values and immense advantages of such an approach far outweigh all the initial "teething" problems. Nevertheless, I have identified the problematic areas and hope that these would provide insights for further research in the area of educational theory and

pedagogical implications, particularly in relation to the Singapore context.

Students' Conservative Attitudes

Because of the structure of the Singapore education system and due emphasis placed on certain set texts as recommended by the Cambridge Examinations Syndicate, students generally have come to associate English Literature with the "Grand Canon", and to study Literature for the sake of literature. Given the examination- and achievement-oriented Singapore education system, any teaching approach that involves digression from the set texts/topics for examinations is often viewed with suspicion by the students. In this respect, first and foremost, the major difficulty that I had to overcome was the students' "conservative" attitude and approach to literature. There was thus the difficult task for me to convince them that the reading-interpretative skills acquired through the linguistic-based approach are not confined to a particular text, but may be extrapolated and serve as a kind of "weaponry" whenever they are confronted with pieces of literary work and even non-literary work in their everyday living.

Students' Lack of Intuition

The second major problem revolved around the students' lack of genuine intuition. And this problem was compounded by the lack of a set/standard way into a particular text that characterizes the linguistic approach. Each poem itself dictates the starting point. In order to find a "way into" a given text, what is essentially needed is the students' real intuition. This criterion of real intuition fundamental to the linguistic approach posed an acute problem for the great majority of ESL learners. In consequence, they did not have enough confidence right off the cuff to handle a given text. They had to be convinced that there is no one sure way of reading a particular text, but of course any interpretation that they presented must be clearly validated by

linguistic evidence found in the given texts.

Students' Inadequate Linguistic Knowledge

The third crucial problem resulted from the students' lack of knowledge of the various linguistic concepts and terminology. Because Linguistics is not a subject that has a place in its own right in the school curriculum, the students were not adequately prepared with the linguistic concepts and terminology necessary for this approach. In addition, the emphasis on certain set texts for examination had given the students a narrowly-based experience of literature. Very often, these set texts are formidably difficult for the majority of the average students. And the difficulties encountered with the prescribed texts had caused these students to develop negative attitudes towards literary texts in general. Such negativism was rather disabling for the pedagogical process. The challenge set before me was clearly to select texts which were reasonably within the grasp of the average students, yet these selected texts should convey interesting and relevant themes at the same time. Also, it was a challenge for me to make the lessons interesting and to incorporate as much student-participation as possible. This, of course, is related to the whole pedagogical issue of classroom motivation.

Non-availability of a Basic Text

The fourth major problem was that there was no single comprehensive text available for the students to consult in addition to the classroom teaching. From my personal exploration of the texts written/edited by the various key figures in the field of stylistics/linguistics and literary criticism, I have discovered that Carter's texts are not appropriate for my targeted school audience: *Literary Text and Language Study*, *Language and Literature* and *Language, Discourse and Literature* comprise collections of linguistic analyses of literary texts which are not well co-ordinated; *The*

Web of Words serves as a moderately good workbook only for certain linguistic concepts for the students but not for them to consult concerning their major difficulties. Widdowson's samples demonstrate what teachers could do with pieces of literary work. That is, these are more appropriate as models for teachers to consider as part of their teaching methodology, and not so for the students' exploration. *The Language of Literature*, even though Cummings and Simmons approach the English Language within the framework of the **systemic** school of modern linguistics, is not without technical sophistication. The technicalities involved could be quite daunting for some students, especially the weaker ones. Though Traugott and Pratt's *Linguistics for Students of Literature* has a minimum of technical terminology, it is unfortunately rather inconclusive and not always clearly focused on literary examples. Leech's *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* has the most extensive coverage of linguistic concepts specifically applicable to poetry, but the analyses only focused on "fragments" of poetry. In a way, this undermines the importance of "the text as a whole" to the overall interpretation of meanings. Quirk's *A University Grammar of English* was not recommended to the students because although it may be a very helpful reference for the teacher, it is certainly too convoluted and abstruse for the students.

In short, I was faced with the difficulty of selecting a comprehensive and an adequate reference text among those available at present for the students to consult concerning their major learning problems, bearing in mind the students' mixed ability and diverse background, class size (average of 35 students per class), classroom contact time (6 X 40 min. per week for what is called the "General Paper") and other factors. So, eventually I had to draw up a list of references comprising the above-mentioned texts. Both the strengths and limitations of each text were made known to the students. For each lesson, the students were directed to refer to different text on the list as a follow-

up of the major linguistic concepts taught. In passing, we may note that at the college/pre-university level in Singapore, the "General Paper" is a compulsory subject in the curriculum. In addition to teaching students the understanding and use of the English Language, this paper also aims at promoting cognitive development in order that students will attain a degree of maturity of thought equivalent to that of a matriculation student. Clearly, these basic objectives of the "General Paper" further strengthen my proposition to incorporate the linguistic approach to literature into the Singapore classroom, instead of the traditional cultural approach.

The Complexity of Bilingual Education

To engage the students in a linguistic exploration of literary texts is to require them to have a skill with understanding grammatical structures, a skill with words and meanings, and a skill with literary effects. That is, such a multi-levelled analysis and a simultaneous convergence of effects at various levels of language organization requires the students to execute skills at a relatively higher cognitive level compared to the traditional cultural approach. Thus, another significant problem that confronted the majority of the students was that they simply lacked these essential skills. I would identify this problematic area as attributable to the much discussed and debated issue of linguistic and literary competence. Also, this problem was compounded for my targeted ESL learners because in most instances, the linguistic features exhibited by the given texts are not present in their native languages. For example, neither Mandarin nor Malay has linguistic features like tense, aspect, concord, articles, gender, etc. These features are marked by semantic elements present in both the languages and are context-bound.

Consider the following schematic representations of Mandarin:

- | | |
|---|--|
| (a) i) nán hái [✓] zi

male child
"boy" | ii) nǚ hái [✓] zi

female child
"girl" |
|---|--|

- (b) i) tā qù kàn diànyǐng[✓]
- | | | |
- s/he go watch movie
- "S/he go[es] [to] watch [a/the] movie."
- "S/he [went] [to] watch [a/the] movie."
- "S/he [is] go[ing] [to] watch [a/the] movie."

- ii) wómen qù kàn diànyǐng[✓]
- | | | |
- we go watch movie
- "We go [to] watch [a/the] movie."
- "We [went] [to] watch [a/the] movie."
- "We [are] go[ing] [to] watch [a/the] movie."

The examples in (a) show that in order to distinguish the gender, the lexical items denoting "male" and "female" are pre-posed to the common noun. Those in (b) show that in Mandarin, there are no articles, markers for tense and infinitive, and distinction between masculine and feminine pronouns on the surface structure. In addition, a comparison between b(i) and b(ii) reveals that there is no rule governing subject-verb agreement in Mandarin: the verb "qu" (= "go") takes the same form regardless of whether the subject is singular/plural. With respect to tense, a single expression in

Mandarin, taken in isolation, can have several equivalent meanings in English. However, it is very often the situational contexts that help to convey the meanings.

If, for instance, one wishes to emphasize the time element in a particular situation, the corresponding semantic item is

either (a) pre-posed to the verb:

i) wómen zuótiān qù kàn diànyǐng
 | | | | |
 we yesterday go watch movie
 "We went [to] watch [the] movie yesterday."

ii) wómen xiànzài qù kàn diànyǐng
 | | | | |
 we now go watch movie
 "We are going [to] watch [a/the] movie now."

or (b) theme-marked:

i) zuótiān wómen qù kàn diànyǐng
 | | | | |
 yesterday we go watch movie
 "Yesterday we went [to] watch [the] movie."

ii) xianzai wómen qù kàn diànyǐng
 | | | | |
 now we go watch movie
 "Now we are going [to] watch [a/the] movie."

The Malay Language exhibits a different word order from English at both the phrasal and clausal levels. For example,

(a) i) phrase:

bunga itu merah
 | | |
 flower that red
 "that red flower"

ii) clause:

Nama saya Ahmad
 | | |
 name my Ahmad
 "My name is Ahmad."

In essence, the following schematic representations of the Malay Language point to the absence of articles, feminine and masculine pronouns, verb inflection marking tense, aspect, subject-verb agreement, etc. Like Mandarin, such linguistic features are context-bound, and the time element is indicated by the semantic features that characterize the language. That is,

- (a) i) dia membaca buku
 | | |
 s/he read book
 "S/he read[s] [the] book."
 "S/he read [the] book."
 "S/he [is] read[ing] [a/the] book."
- ii) mereka membaca buku
 | | |
 they read book
 "They read [the] book." (both present and past)
 "They are reading [the] book."
- (b) i) dia sedang membaca buku
 | | | |
 s/he currently read buku
 "S/he [is] currently reading [a/the] book."
- ii) mereka membaca buku semalam
 | | | |
 they read book yesterday
 "They read [the] book yesterday."

The whole issue here is that the complexity of bilingualism and the interference of "interlanguage" were some of the contributing factors that render the learning task a challenging one for the better students but an intimidating one for the weaker learners. To overcome the students' feeling of intimidation, I had attempted to incorporate pair-work/group-work into my classroom practice; and to ensure that the classroom

atmosphere was one where the students were not worried about embarrassing themselves when they made mistakes. These strategies have important pedagogical implications which are, however, not my primary focus at this juncture.

It must be pointed out that the term "bilingualism" is not understood in the same sense by everybody. In the Singapore context, the bilingual education policy means that all students in the school system from pre-primary to pre-university level must learn two languages: the mother tongue (i.e. one of the official languages in Singapore--Malay, Mandarin or Tamil) and English (the other one of the four official languages). Within the broad aims of the education policy, bilingualism is the rule rather than the exception among the culturally and linguistically heterogeneous people. Also, used in the Singapore context, the terms "English as a First Language" (EL 1) and "English as a Second Language" (EL 2) do not signify the status, degree of proficiency or order of acquisition of the languages. They are simply labels for the English language taught in English medium schools and non-English medium schools (which are fast disappearing) respectively. In both cases, English is a foreign language for the vast majority of students.

In conjunction with the problematic area related to the complexity of bilingualism, it is worthwhile for us to take note of the two different theories of language learning: the **Behaviourist** view and the **Cognitive** view (Crystal, 1987: 372). The Behaviourist view sees foreign language learning as a process of imitation and reinforcement. Properties of the first language (L 1) are thought to exercise an influence on the process of the second language (L 2) learning: learners "transfer" linguistic features from one language to the other. Similarities between the two languages cause "positive transfer"--it proves acceptable to use the L 1 features in the L 2 setting. For example, the assumption that the grammatical subject precedes a verb in the unmarked

construction satisfactorily transfers from Mandarin to English. Differences cause "negative transfer", generally known as "interference"--the transfer of L 1 features to the L 2 causes errors. For example, the assumption about the similar verb form for both singular and plural subjects does not satisfactorily transfer from Mandarin to English. This view sees negative transfers as a major source of foreign language learning difficulty.

The Cognitive view emphasizes the role of cognitive factors in language learning. Learners are credited with using their cognitive abilities in a creative way to work out hypotheses about a structure of the foreign language. They construct rules, experiment with them, and modify them if the rules prove to be inadequate. This view sees the process of language learning as a series of transitional stages. At each stage, the learners are in control of a language system that is equivalent to neither the L 1 nor the L 2--an "interlanguage".

The pedagogical approach which is based on the Behaviourist view aims at forming new, correct linguistic habits through intensive practice. At the core of this approach is a procedure known as **contrastive analysis**, the systematic comparison of L 1 and L 2 in order to predict areas of greatest learning difficulty. With respect to the Cognitive view, **error analysis** plays a central role in the pedagogical approach. This approach sees the errors as vital for providing positive evidence about the nature of the learning process, as the learner gradually works out what the foreign language system is.

To understand the ways languages come to be learned in the "mixed" setting of the Singapore context, it is necessary to devise more sophisticated models which focus on the relationship between the processes of natural acquisition and those of formal learning, and which pay adequate attention to the needs and aims of the students, and

to the nature of the social settings in which foreign language interaction takes place. Problems of language learning/teaching in the culturally and linguistically heterogeneous context of Singapore are complex, and solutions are never simple. Though it is challenging for us to explore the complexity of language learning and the implications for English Language teaching in Singapore, it is certainly beyond the scope of this thesis.

Evaluation and Suggestions

In retrospect, evaluation of my classroom experience in the Singapore context points to the fact that there were some elements of failure when a linguistic-based approach to poetry was put into practice. This is because of the multiple problems and difficulties encountered. Thus, I can confidently claim that only a qualified success was achieved when my extended essay (39.499) was put to the test. Even so, nevertheless, I still believe in the theory as proposed by Widdowson et al., but this time by incorporating other teaching techniques. Here, I propose carefully designed worksheets at the various linguistic levels (at least at the initial stage) for each lesson to be a possible solution. To facilitate active learning among students, we need to engage them in the discovery of meanings through purposeful worksheets, active questioning and appropriate feedback. Of course, this entails a whole area of educational theory and ESL methodology which is again not the pivotal focus of my thesis.

It is important that the instructional approach should be structured on a progressive basis: it should proceed from concepts which are concrete to those which are abstract, from simple to complex, from known to unknown. Although there is no one definitive instructional procedure for a particular poem/concept, I have devised the "mini-syllabus" in the following section to illustrate how the selected poems and the related linguistic concepts may be organized and implemented for my targeted ESL learners.

2.2 SUGGESTED MINI-SYLLABUS

One possible option of ordering the selected poems is to group them according to the various linguistic levels: phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, discoursal, etc. However, my exploration of the selected poems and a corpus of others has convinced me that the different linguistic levels often overlap. That is, to a certain extent, the linguistic levels are arbitrary. Besides, my exploration also reveals that analysis and interpretation are inextricably intertwined. It is therefore artificial for us to separate the various linguistic levels. But I have done so within the analysis of each individual poem. The purpose for this is to establish a systematic recording of features to point the way to the reader.

The design of the following mini-syllabus is based on a structure in which the inter-related linguistic concepts are systematically organized in a principled and progressive way. It is hoped that such a structure provides for control in that teaching can be conducted in an ordered manner, and thus becomes easier and more efficient. However, it must be pointed out that in some analyses, there is no clear-cut division between the major/minor linguistic concepts as proposed; they complement one another. The units and concepts are designed to provide an integrated and a progressive study programme, although it is inevitable that some readers will find some units more complex than the sequence might suggest. I have tried to incorporate a built-in flexibility which allows cross-reference to texts and analytical strategies used in other units.

The chief criterion governing my proposed set-up here is that each lesson should provide students with the opportunity for revising concepts taught in previous lessons while new concepts are being introduced. In this way, students can be meaningfully

engaged in practising their reading-interpretative skills acquired from previous lessons while acquiring new strategies from the new lesson at the same time. So, I would assert that unlike the traditional cultural approach to poetry, each linguistic-based lesson can never be a mundane task but can only be a challenging and a revealing one for both teacher and learners alike.

UNIT	POEMS	KEY FEATURES STUDIED	LINGUISTIC CONCEPTS FOR CLASSROOM EXPLORATION		SUGGESTED TOPICS FOR REVISION
			MAJOR	MINOR	
1.	"Noise"	Parallel Structure	--Articles --Sound Effects: the sibilants & onomatopoeia	--Rankshifting --Lexis: dichotomy of semantic features	--
2.	"Mending Wall"	Lexical & Semantic Repetition	--Lexical & Semantic Cohesion	--VPs: non-finite & finite (trans./intrans.) --Deviant Word Order	--Repetition: Structural [see Unit 1] Lexical Semantic
3.	"The Main-Deep"	Syntactic Deviation	--Sound Cohesion --Collocation --VPs: progressive & perfective aspect	--Graphology --Pre- & Post-modification of NPs	--Collocation: Natural [see Unit 2] Unnatural --VPs: Finite & Non-finite
4.	"Up-hill"	Interrogatives	--Modal Auxiliaries --Pronouns	--Verbals --Lexical Sets	--Graphology: Regular [see Unit 3] Irregular
5.	"Song XXX"	Imperatives	--Verb + Particle --Verb + Preposition	--Deixis --Lexical Sets	--Deictic Features: Articles [see Unit 1] Pronouns [see Unit 4]
6.	"Christian Cemetery"	Topicalization	--Passivization --Past Tense vs. Past Participles	--Perfective Aspect --Analytic Mood	--Verb Phrases: especially participles [see Unit 3] also tense and mood [see Unit 4]

UNIT	POEMS	KEY FEATURES STUDIED	LINGUISTIC CONCEPTS FOR CLASSROOM EXPLORATION		SUGGESTED TOPICS FOR REVISION
			MAJOR	MINOR	
7.	"Valley Song"	Clause Structures	--Pronominalization --Role-relations --Semantic Features: Componential Analysis	--Lexical Deviance & Unnatural Collocates	--Active/Passive Voice [see unit 6] --Lexis: Dichotomy of Semantic features [see Unit 1]
8.	"A Death to Us"	Syntactic Ambiguity	--Types of Phrases & Clauses --Word Order	--VPs: Trans/Intrans. --Premodification of NPs	--Verb Phrases: Trans./Intrans. [see Unit 2] --Noun Phrases: Pre- & Post-modification [see Unit3]
9.	"I'm Apt To Be Surly Getting Up Early"	Types of Sentences	--Co-ordination & Subordination --Rankshifting & Recursion	--Theme/Focus --Postmodification	--Clause Structures [see Unit 8] --Rankshifting [see Unit 1]
10.	"Still Shines when You Think of It"	Mixed Registers	--Colloquial/Poetic Registers --Lexical Sets	--Neologism	--Lexical Sets [see Unit 4] --Neologism [see Unit 3]
11.	"Mother Tongue to Childrens' Lip"	Oppositional Discourse	--Formal/Informal Registers	--Lexical Sets	--Colloquial VPs: Verb + Particle Verb + Preposition [see Unit 5] --Contractions [see Unit 10]