

Remembering the poetic function of language in intercultural education

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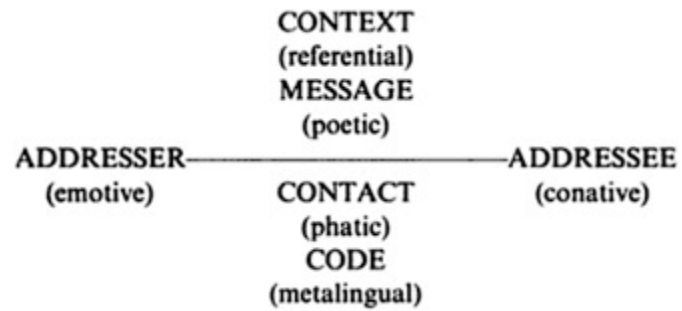
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1. Remembering Jakobson in the information age

Intercultural understanding between people from a different culture, generation, social class, history or religion often hinges less on good intentions and noble attitudes and beliefs than on tiny details of timing and spacing.



Poiesis, from the Greek term ποιεῖν, which means "to make", is "the activity in which a person brings something into being that did not exist before". It refers to the material make-up of the message itself, not its content. In this sense, every use of language is potentially poetic because it brings into being a speaking subject that didn't exist before the act of speaking.

The poetic function of language with its focus on the form/structure/shape/sound of the message was discarded by the communicative approach, together with translation, in favor of the efficient and effective *transmission of information* through communicative competence.

We should not forget the political origins of this communicative approach after WWII.

After the global slaughter of WWII, that was seen as a quintessential battle over national linguistic and cultural values, the new liberalism was going to commodify, instrumentalize language so as to make it totally translatable, i.e., make meaning totally comprehensible across codes and "information systems".

(See: Gramling, David. 2021. *The invention of multilingualism*. Cambridge U. Press).

In our information age, Jakobson's poetic function can be found not only in the shape and sound of words themselves, but in the digital algorithms that mediate their use.

"Digital capitalism is flattening English and streamlining it and conforming it and taking the body out of English, taking our tongues out of English, taking our cultures out of the words...I think what we're seeing, especially during the pandemic, is how the kind of English that we accept and are getting accustomed to is English in the service of efficiency, or communications in the service of efficiency. That is cutting out this huge immigrant population and people who come from immigrant populations. There are so many different beautiful musical inflections of the English language. But you have to slow down and understand. You have to be there. And you have to be willing to be patient to understand what other people are saying in an accent that you are not accustomed to, which we, as a capitalist culture, are not willing to be patient for."
(Cathy Park Hong in Wortham & Morris, 2021)

2. Switch in focus: From intercultural communication to language materiality

It is with the desire to go beyond an information-processing model of communication that Michael Byram in the 90's developed his model of intercultural communication. That model included having the right cultural attitudes (*savoir etre*) and the right political awareness (*savoir s'engager*). But these aspects of intercultural communicative competence have been understood as psychological and ideational aspects of communication, not linguistic/semiotic. As language educators, we need a new way of looking at language itself – language in its materiality.

What do we mean by materiality?

Physical, perceptual, technological, political aspects of language use.

The emerging field of language and materiality studies both the materiality of language and language use (e.g., sounds, shapes, conversational structure) and the relation of language and material culture (e.g., digital technologies, entextualizations, recordings, film literature) that make meaning and value.

(See: Cavanaugh, J. & Shankar S. (eds.) *Language and materiality. Ethnographic and theoretical explorations*. 2017. Cambridge U Press)

Jakobson (1960) was interested in bringing together linguistics and poetics
Keane & Silverstein (2017) bring the semiotic and the social together to explain the power exerted by signs on social actors.

“Considering the materiality of language is a way of putting human projects and human imagination back into the world of causes and effects, of consequences, or origins of constraints, of possibilities. A world of objective material circumstances, of affordances of social life . . . That is nonetheless not deterministic, because the point of affordance is that an affordance is only a possibility that may or may not be taken up.” (Cavanaugh & Shankar 2017:34)

3.The poetic function in pedagogic practice

Performance-based advanced Italian class at UC Berkeley. Teacher: Annaria Bellezza
Intercultural communication activity based on Pirandello (1921).

Over 5 weeks, students were asked to:

- write a story in narrative mode set in the context of the times we were living, as *writers*
- tell the story orally to the class, as *storytellers*
- adapt the story for the stage and write a script, as *playwrights*
- edit each other's scripts collaboratively, as *editors*
- cast students to play the multiple characters they created, as *directors*
- perform the parts assigned to them, as *actors*
- reflect as *critics* on the interpretation and performance of their and others' work

3.1 Performing intercultural communication

Six immigrants in search of a border

- Jose: Anglo-American student cast as first generation Mexican-American
- Kevin: Italian-American student cast as a White American Border Patrol guard

Kevin has arrested Jose and his 4 companions; Jose tries to get him to empathize with their plight.

Extract 1

José: I lost five years of my life at Soledad Prison for a crime I did not commit.

Kevin: I am sorry, but I believe in our justice system.

José: You are sorry? And what justice? Do you know what it's like to look like me, no job, no education, and an accent ...

Kevin: I have an accent, so what.

José: No, *my* Chicano accent.

Kevin: Look, I have many Mexican friends...

José: Your bourgeois international friends from Mexico City don't count. They are... *like you*.
(*he looks at Kevin straight into his blue eyes*)

Kevin: Right, I guess we all have to be poor and brown to get it.

José: (*pauses, then tries a different approach*) What's the word *border* to you?

Kevin: A line separating two countries.

José: Do you know what it means to me? Do you know what it means to Amir, to Kayla, to Malek who walked for days, got robbed, got raped, and saw family members drowning in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea when their rickety, overloaded boat capsized on their way to Italy?

Kevin: I am sorry, I truly am, but what do you want me to do? Solve the problems of the world? Do you also want to blame me for getting the virus?

José: Yes, I am. We had no access to information, no access to masks, didn't have the luxury to work from home like you people...(*pauses*)...ever tried to put yourself in *our* shoes?

Extract 2

'I learned a lot about the plight of immigrants, wrote essays about it, watched movies on the subject, but I never really *got it* until I worked through this scene: playing a Mexican immigrant in search of a border had a profound impact on my view of immigrants in general, as I truly *felt* his pain when I spoke his words, which caused me to move my body in a certain way, and say things I wouldn't otherwise have said, when I had to struggle to put myself in his shoes and call out injustices that, as part of the dominant culture, I am a part of...'

From: Annamaria Bellezza in Adler et al. (forthcoming). Teaching the conflicts in foreign language education. In: Bojsen, H., Daryai-Hansen, P., Holmen, A. & Risager, KI. (eds.) *The nexus of translanguaging and epistemological decentring in higher education and research*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Savoir s'engager: a material process of making meaning

Jose uses concrete, particular, embodied experiences, memories, aspirations, and addresses Kevin directly (*what is the border to you?*):

- - recollections (e.g., *I saw family members drowning*),
- - emotions (e.g., *do you know what this means to me?*)
- - requests for empathy (e.g., *put yourself in our shoes*)

and he draws on the relationality between immigrants to Italy and immigrants from Mexico on different scales of space and time.

Kevin, by contrast, uses reified, commodified, impersonal language and refers to a universal *we, the justice system, or the world*:

- - prior statements made by impersonal others (e.g., *I have many Mexican friends*)
- - stereotypical prejudiced utterances (e.g., *I am sorry, but I believe in our justice system*)
- - informational impersonal pronouncements (e.g., *a border is a line separating two countries*)

I interviewed Annamaria about the word “border” in Italian and English.

3.2. The relationality of meaning and value

Extract 3

Annamaria:

The original phrase in Italian was "*Cosa vuol dire la parola confine per te?*", which literally means "What does the word *border* mean to you?" which I shortened to "What's the *word* border to you" - Kevin's reply to either question would have been: "It means a line separating two countries". We discussed the use of *confine* as opposed to *frontiera* and had an interesting conversation on the meaning of the two words, which are sometimes used as synonyms in Italian. *Border was understood as a geographical, static line separating spaces between contiguous realities* and belonging to the same culture or different cultures that recognize each other. Borders were seen as being boundaries which belonged to the dimension of known spaces, of the known world. *The Frontier, on the other hand, was seen as representing the threshold of demarcation that separated the known from the unknown, order from disorder, civilization from barbarism.* It was seen not as a static and well-defined line but a geographical area with external borders susceptible to mutation, a sort of elastic territorial belt, overlooking unknown territories. *Kevin understood the word border as confine while Josè imagined it as frontiera. The Italian word that was ultimately agreed upon in the scene in Italian was confine, even though in Josè's imagined world it was a frontiera, where future scenarios of possibilities could be imagined.*

Claire:

Why was that?

Annamaria:

The white student who played Josè was of Northern European descent – from the conversations we had in class, it seems like he came from a privileged background in terms of financial and social capital, and I think that is in fact the reason the female student of Mexican descent who wrote the scene cast him to play Josè. The Italian- American student who played Kevin came from a very liberal activist background, with ancestors having gone through Ellis Island, and he was cast to play Kevin, in a role that was not comfortable for him. Kevin had to be literally confined into the word *confine* while Josè in a way was more free to cross over, expand, explore, reach out because of the malleable nature of his *frontiera*. **Both students had to stretch quite a bit in order to enter into characters with biographies very different from their own. In terms of the affective resonance that both terms – the English *border* and the Italian *confine* – have for me: having lived in the US for so long and having been exposed to American border politics, the word in English has taken on a heavier, deeper meaning for me, as it did for all the students in class, who found it more challenging to perform the scene in English as it hit home more deeply, especially on the heels of the last four years of political and social turmoil.**

Claire:

so why did they choose the Italian word *confine* rather than *frontiera* to act out the scene? *Was the prompt: sei personaggi in cerca di un confine or in cerca di una frontiera?*

Annamaria:

The class ultimately settled for *confine* because it resonated more closely to the English meaning of border (a line separating two political and geographical as in countries), and because it meant "security", "safety", crossing over into a safe zone, away from the strife and danger of the places they left behind. And yes, the six immigrants were also in search of the opportunities and dreams that the word *frontiera* evoked but it was argued that the need for security and safety superseded the desire for opportunities and that the immediate need for these immigrants was to cross a border, a *confine*. That is why *at the end the title was "Sei personaggi in cerca di un confine"*. (personal communication)

Politics, then, is not a psychological battle of wills, or a matter of party politics, but a clash of discourses engaged in a symbolic power struggle for acceptance. As Christian Chun expresses it:

“the political is discursively and materially realized in its dialogic co-constructions within the media, the economy, culture, identity, affect, *and education*”
(personal communication, my emphasis).

Savoir être in a material and a relational perspective

While it has always meant the ability to have empathy, i.e., to "put oneself in someone else's shoes", *savoir être* has also entailed, as Clifford Geertz said, "catching 'their' views in 'our' vocabularies" (Geertz 1983:10).

In *Poétique de la relation* (1990), the Caribbean poet Edouard Glissant proposes an ecological framework to understand the relation of Self to Other, particularly across racial divides. For Glissant *savoir être* means *savoir être en relation* first with oneself, then with others. As he writes : "*Je te parle dans ta langue et c'est dans la mienne que je te comprends.*" ["I speak to you in your language and it is in my language that I understand you"] (Glissant 1990:122).

Glissant's principle of relationality was to be found already in Jakobson's principle of equivalence that he considered to be the basis of poetry. This principle established that the meaning of a word is based not only on its (paradigmatic) dictionary definition but on its (syntagmatic) position in the ongoing discourse.

To make this principle of equivalence more visible, we can rewrite Jose's turn-at-talk in the following way:

"Do you know what it means to me? Do you know what it means to Amir, to Kayla, to Malek who walked for days, got robbed, got raped, and saw family members drowning in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea? "

do you know what it means
to me?
do you know what it means
to Amir, to Kayla, to Malek
who walked for days,
got robbed,
got raped,
and saw their family drown
in the Mediterranean Sea?

4. From political education to translingual activism

In Byram's model, *savoir s'engager* falls under "attitudes" of curiosity and openness, and *savoir être* falls under "critical cultural awareness".

Having the right attitude and the right awareness amounts to having the right *stance*, that Manuela Guilherme defines as "a *cognitive and emotional* endeavour that aims at individual and collective emancipation, social justice, and political commitment" (Guilherme 2002 cited in Byram 2021:80 note 24).

The political education Byram advocates is meant to develop students' "ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of an explicit, systematic process of *reasoning*, values present in one's own and other cultures and countries" (Byram p.66).

Where is language ?

By contrast, for Pennycook (2008) language is always in translation from one materiality to another.

What Pennycook advocates is therefore **translingual activism** rather than political education (Pennycook 2019). Translingual activism resurrects and makes untranslatabilities visible and discussable in the language classroom. Pennycook writes:

“When we learn a language, we enter the traffic in meaning... Language teaching might be able to take up a more dynamic, mobile role in the world as a form of *translingual activism*, as an activity tied not so much to the provision of the linguistic wherewithal for the movement of people but to the linguistic movement of meanings.” (Pennycook 2010:141-142)

Translingual activism not only strives to make visible the untranslatabilities and incompatibilities in meaning inherent in intercultural communication.

Conclusion

Intercultural language education cannot be effective without a new way of looking at language. Not as information to be communicated and exchanged, but as a symbolic system with awesome material powers.

THANK YOU !

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