ENRICHED AND DEPRIVED SYMBOLS IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Abstract

This study focuses on the moment of language acquisition that occurs before the student has consolidated the symbol-referent relationship in order to take advantage here to guide the absorption of that symbol along a sensorial-cognitive path that is favored by the student. This is the initial moment when the student first comes into contact with the linguistic symbol and does not yet know what it refers to. This contact is necessarily channelled through physical senses. Traditionally in language teaching, the symbol is channelled through the spoken form or the written form. We propose ways to exploit this pre-linguistic moment through different sensory stimulations, in effect integrating the body into the language acquisition process. This orientation of teaching is often addressed in what are considered alternative teaching methods. The point of this study is to bring into clearer focus the underlying mechanism of alternative methodologies that we may intuitively feel help the students learn but are not sure of how or why they do so.

Keywords: language acquisition, symbol-referent relationship, sensorial-cognitive path, sensory stimulations, alternative methodologies

Definition of symbols in reference to language teaching

Symbolism has been extensively studied in the fields of aesthetics, art history, philosophy of language, sociology, and a long etcetera. In this essay, we are thinking of the symbol quite simply as a unit of meaning. Regarding language acquisition, this can be thought of in terms of such minimal units of meaning as the morpheme (for example with prefixes, suffixes, etc.), as discreet lexical units (vocabulary), syntactic units (phrases or sentences, grammar systems), and even as discourse (above sentence level, such as with specific genres such as poems or stories, especially in considering a work as an organic, unified whole). The order of acquiring these units of meaning is not always the same, of course. We might start at the lexical level, teaching basic vocabulary. Yet, for example through the gestalt strategy, some enter into a relationship with language at the syntactic level, learning first an entire phrase before understanding the specific words that make up that phrase. Some might even learn entire songs or poems before getting a handle on the specific vocabulary or syntactic rules that make up the song. So for our purposes, we would

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consider the symbol in the sense that it is constituted as a unit, be it at the morpheme, lexical, syntactic, or discursive level.

In semiology, the notion of the symbol is discussed in terms of:

object

concept

symbol

There has been much discussion of the relationships among these three elements. We will not be addressing that here. What we wish to point out, nevertheless, is that traditional teaching methods reflect this outlook, by helping the student to recognize and remember what symbol is used for what concept (morphological and lexical competence) and developing the correct usage of grammar rules for the combination of various component parts of sentences (syntactic competence), and finally reaching competence in the discourse of the language (pragmatic competence). Now, there is an underlying here notion regarding the nature of the symbol (morphemes, words, sentences) in this model, which would normally go unquestioned. However, if we look to Suzanne K. Langer's model of symbolic representation this assumption becomes clearer and ultimately helps us to shed light on certain practices in alternative teaching methods.

Discursive and presentational symbolic systems of representation: Suzanne Langer

We commonly refer to language as "discourse." Yet, if language is discourse what, then, is not discourse? Langer (1953) divides human systems of symbolic representation into two basic types: discursive and presentational. We would illustrate the model this way:

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">object</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">concept</td></tr>
<tr><td>discursive symbolic representation
systems of meaning
language proper</td><td>presentational symbolic representation
sensory abstractions
art</td></tr>
<tr><td>spoken and written language
math
morse code
computer languages
etc</td><td>language arts (poetry, literary genres)
plastic arts (painting, sculpture etc)
audiovisual arts
music, dance
etc</td></tr>
</table>

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Langer describes **discursive** representation as language in which the minimal units of meaning are abstract symbols, such as numbers in mathematics, or morphemes and words in language proper. These minimal units of meaning are represented by symbols that can be defined, translated, and have no inherent relationship to the meaning that they represent. The symbol is an arbitrary representation of a concept and could be substituted with a different symbol (we could use "table" for the place we eat or we could use a different symbol, as long as there is consensus to use the same word). Discursive symbolic systems have consistent, systematic rules. The value of, say, number two, remains constant no matter what formula it appears in. In language, we have established units of meaning - morphemes, lexical meanings, sentence level meanings, etc. which allow for dictionaries to lay out those standard meanings.

Presentational symbolism, on the other hand, does not have systematic rules which remain constant from one work to another. In painting, for example, if we consider color, or shapes, or perhaps even perspective, as the basic element out of which meaning is created, we cannot say that yellow has a meaning that stays constant from one painting to the next. The meaning that the yellow color takes on in the painting is a function of its relation to the other colors in the painting. We cannot offer a dictionary-style, constant definition of the denotation or connotation of the color yellow, or shapes, or what have you. It varies from painting to painting. Even though there have been attempts to characterize art as language, Langer reminds us that we should keep in mind how we define language (1985, 102) before doing so:

> It appears, then, that although the different media of non-verbal representation are often referred to as distinct "languages," this is really a loose terminology. Language in the strict sense is essentially discursive; it has permanent units of meaning which are combinable into larger units; it has fixed equivalences that make definition and translation possible; its connotations are general, so that it requires non-verbal acts, like pointing, looking, or emphatic voice-inflections, to assign specific denotation to its terms. In all these salient characters it differs from wordless symbolism, which is non-discursive and untranslatable, does not allow definitions within its own system, and cannot directly convey generalities. The meanings given through language are successively understood, and gathered into a whole by the process called discourse; the meanings of all other symbolic elements that compose a larger, articulate symbol are understood only through the meaning of the whole, through their relations within the total structure. Their very functioning as symbols depends on the fact that they are involved in a simultaneous, integral presentation. This kind of semantic may be called "presentational symbolism," to characterize its essential distinction from discursive symbolism, or "language" proper.

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We can generalize the basic distinction between discursive and presentational systems as language per se versus art (keeping in mind that the language arts *use* discourse to create a work of art, see Langer 1953). Both types of symbolism have an area of overlap, in that the abstractions in a discursive system of language need the physical manifestation of the symbols via speech, written words, braille tactile dots, etc. which work through an immediate appeal to our physical senses, and on the other hand, works of art, which are first and foremost an appeal to the physical senses, do have abstract structures, or systems, through which the work is manifested. Therefore, in considering the differences between the two basic types of symbolic representation, it seems to be more a question of degree: discursive symbolism has a heavier emphasis on the system of rules into which the specific symbols are used, while presentational symbolisms have a greater investment in an appeal to the physical senses.

In language teaching we may (quite naturally and logically) find ourselves favoring the view of language as discourse by helping the student acquire competence in the systems of meaning (morphological, lexical and syntactic, pragmatic). However, as teachers, we often find that many of our students have a difficult time interiorizing language if we focus on language as a system of grammar rules. Thus we may intuitively search for ways to modify this focus to reach those many hard-to-reach students. We propose that the focus on the discursive (where there is a higher degree of emphasis on the system itself) in language teaching can be fortified with techniques that can be classified as pertaining to presentational symbolic systems of representation (where there is a greater emphasis on the appeal to the sensory input).

Fusing discursive and presentational symbolism: minimalized, enriched and deprived symbols

Minimalized symbols

If we consider language proper as essentially system-based, minimal units of meaning such as words become indifferent symbols. Whatever word is agreed upon to refer to a given concept is unimportant as long as there is consensus to use the same symbol consistently. So in discursive symbolism, there is a certain indifference as to the material aspect of the symbol. The symbol can be minimalized, pared down to its essence as abstract symbol that represents a concept. The symbol can then become materially sparse, tending toward the minimum material features necessary to keep it able to stay a discrete unit of meaning. This allows for a very efficient use of symbols. Traditional approaches to language-teaching focus on language as a system, on symbols in a minimalized sense, which is extremely time and space efficient for those who can absorb language this way. This fast way of teaching language, by the way, fits in well with the industrialized nature of the educational

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system which took hold after the onset of the industrial revolution, churning out greater and greater numbers of students, for various socio-economic reasons (see White 1997). Yet some students may have difficulty with the minimalized symbol-meaning relationship, and the following discussion offers another way to deal with the symbol-referent relationship, which ultimately refers us to the contrast presented by Langer between discursive and presentational symbolism. In order to clarify what we mean, let's look at some examples of where discourse is not quite so independent from the material aspect of the symbols that make it up.

Enriched symbols

Language forms an integral part of ritual, for example through incantations, or chants. A chant is inextricably dependent on the correct "material" sound production of the language so it must be pronounced with specific words and phrases, at a controlled pace, perhaps with a specific intonation. The Buddhist mantra is another case where the word is more than an indifferent symbolic representation of a concept - the word or phrase of the mantra is considered to be part of a spiritual conduit, containing a certain power. The mantra must be carefully pronounced. The discourse here is material-dependent, sound-dependent, production-dependent, and cannot be indifferently exchanged with other phrases, other words, other symbols. The language of ritual may be enhanced with linguistic tropes, for example, with simple sound plays like rhyme or alliteration, as in Shakespeare's Macbeth (Act IV scene 1) "Double, double, toil and trouble, fire burn and cauldron bubble." These are examples of what we would describe as enriched symbols. Keeping in mind the contrast with the streamlined use of indifferent symbols in discourse, here the symbol has integrated into it sensorial enhancement through such techniques as linguistic tropes, rhythm, or other specific sound features. In sum, the sensorial features make up a significant degree of importance in the symbol.

Poetic language is, in fact, a form of enriched symbolism, where the physical features of the symbols themselves (sound play or rhyme for example) form an integral part of the language. There are many examples where language presents more than the efficient, neutrally-oriented concept-symbol relationship. Graphic arts endow language symbols with an aesthetic dimension, as we can find by choosing the letter style on our computers, or as we find in advertisements which use special lettering styles, to cite just two of the many, many cases of how the written symbol is enhanced with visual features. Sound-wise as well, we can enrich the symbol through variations in the medium we use, such as singing, or using computerized voice. In other words, features from presentational representation are integrated into the discursive symbol (thus making it less efficient as a symbolic entity in a system).

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These examples of enriched symbols are probably familiar to us. Yet, there is another fascinating case of symbol enrichment that may not seem immediately intuitive or natural, which is the condition called "synesthesia." Synesthesia is a neurologically based phenomenon in which stimulation of one sensory or cognitive pathway leads to automatic, involuntary experiences in a second sensory or cognitive pathway. In one common form of synesthesia, known as *grapheme → color synesthesia, letters* or *numbers* are perceived as inherently colored, while in *ordinal linguistic personification,* numbers, days of the week and months of the year evoke personalities. In spatial-sequence, or *number form* synesthesia, numbers, months of the year, and/or days of the week elicit precise locations in space (for example, 1980 may be "farther away" than 1990), or may have a three-dimensional view of a year as a map (clockwise or counterclockwise) (cited from Wikipedia *http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synesthesia* 23-4-2009). Daniel Tammet was born with this condition. He has an outstanding ability to remember numbers and learn languages. He describes his way of thinking in his memoirs *Born on a Blue Day: A Memoir of Aspergers and an Extraordinary Mind*:

> Numbers are my friends, and they are always around me. Each one is unique and has its own personality. The number 11 is friendly and 5 is loud, whereas 4 is both shy and quiet - it's my favorite number perhaps because it reminds me of myself. Some are big -- 23, 667, 1,179 -- while others are small: 6, 13, 581. Some are beautiful, like 333, and some are ugly, like 289. To me, every number is special[...] Scientists call my visual, emotional experience of numbers synesthesia, a rare neurological mixing of the senses, which most commonly results in the ability to see alphabetical letters and/or numbers in color. Mine is an unusual and complex type, through which I see numbers as shapes, colors, textures and motions. The number 1, for example is a brilliant and bright white, like someone shining a flashlight into my eyes. Five is a clap of thunder or the sound of waves crashing against rocks. Thirty-seven is lumpy like porridge, while 89 reminds me of falling snow. 160-161

It might be interesting to consider the condition of synesthesia in terms of symbol enrichment. The symbols are enhanced through different sensorial dimensions - visual, spatial, even kinesthetic and emotional dimensions are added to symbols. If we think of this kind of symbolism in terms of Langer's model of symbolic representation, Tammet is enhancing the symbol with features that come out of presentational symbolism. He is fusing discursive and presentational forms of symbolic representation. Given Tammet's extraordinary ability to remember numbers and learn languages it seems, at the very least, worthy of considering sensorial enhancement of symbols in terms of how we teach language acquisition.

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Deprived symbols

Up to this point, we have discussed minimal (efficient, materially sparse) symbols and enriched (materially enhanced) symbols. One other way we can look at symbols is by focusing exclusively on the material part of the symbol without taking into account what it means, without dealing with its referent. This is what we mean when we refer to a deprived symbol: the symbol has been deprived of its referent. We believe that it is important to acknowledge the possibility of working with symbols as a material entity before associating the symbol with its meaning. We can work with a deprived symbol and at the same time enhance its material features. In other words, we can enhance the sensorial features of the symbol before we attach the symbol to its referent. This is the crux of an alternative way to conceive of second language acquisition.

Enriched and deprived symbols and language teaching: a practical application

So the question becomes for us, as teachers of language, to see how we can apply the question of sensorial enhancement to teaching language. Let's start with a simple list of the senses: sight, sound, touch, smell, taste, and we would also include kinesthetics (movement), and consider what kind of activities we can set up for our students. We could start at any of the unit levels of meaning (suffixes or prefixes, vocabulary, simple phrases, more complicated sentences, groups of sentences). We are using the case of Spanish learners of English as a second language, but this orientation can be applied to other languages as well. As an example, we can take the phrase:

Bob ate an ice cream cone.

Let's say that the teacher presents the phrase in written form and she reads it out loud. At this point, what normally follows is getting across the meaning of the phrase to the students. The teacher has the option of orally explaining in the native tongue what it means "Bob comió un helado." Many of us know from practice that some students at this point will absorb and retain the sentence and its meaning likely in long term memory; others will retain it in short term memory, while others may absorb the meaning but not the phrase, while some may even absorb the phrase but not the meaning. And some will absorb neither the phrase nor the meaning. Therefore, what we may look for is a way to enhance the students' experience of the phrase, and a common way to do this is through an appeal to the visual sense by presenting images of a boy eating an ice cream cone, and an appeal to the visual and minimally-kinesthetic sense by having the students write out the phrase, and perhaps setting up an exercise where the student has to match the phrase to the image. These are good ways of bringing in sensorial connections to the phrase in question.

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Yet, there are two important issues to note here: 1) In the matching exercise we are priviledging a visual sense, and some students may be weaker with the visual sense while being stronger in another sense. It is important to keep in mind that not all students will work best through the visual sense. So we want to appeal to the widest variety of senses possible. 2) In the exercise of connecting the phrase to its corresponding image, we are maintaining an intellectual, analytical aspect to the setup: the (phrase-meaning) relationship is kept intact, and in order to complete the exercise correctly, the student must have both prongs (1-the phrase and 2-the meaning) of the setup assimilated. But as we noted above, students may need even more sensorial reinforcement of the phrase before that intellectual connection can be established. Therefore, the exercises that follow can be used to reinforce the material experience the student has with the phrase in question, for both 1) students who have been able to consolidate the connection between the phrase and its meaning - for these students the exercises that follow serve to amplify the variety of sensorial activations of the phrases, probably fortifying the long term memory ability of the phrase; and for 2) students who have not yet consolidated the phrase-meaning connection and who need sensorial, experiential emphasis on the phrase first in order to activate through other routes the material-conceptual association. For the latter students we would say that we are working with a deprived symbol: a symbol deprived of its referent, which we consider an entirely valid and useful moment to exploit always, of course, with the eventual aim of consolidating the symbol-referent connection in the student.

In what follows, I suggest a series of activities that are aimed at expanding the sensorial experience the student can have with the language in question. The specific example we give layers the sensorial stimulations in an accumulative fashion. Most of these ideas could feasibly be carried out in a regular classroom setting, yet some require a more open space such as an open playground area or better yet a small gym. Our aim is not to provide an extensive array of activities here. The aim is to provide one example among the great number of possible variations we could create through the basic notion of sensorial stimulation.

Our first suggestion is to take advantage of the opportunity here to introduce a tag phrase, which is so common in English and is often overlooked in our lessons, such as: did he?; does he?; will they?; won't they?; are you?; am I?; yes I am; no I'm not, etc. So here we add a tag phrase such as "yes he did" to our sentence:

Bob ate an ice cream cone, yes he did.

which will enhance the rhythmic structure of the phrase as will become clear in the following explanation.

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Next let's continue to enhance the sound value of the phrase. Instead of *Bob ate an ice cream cone, yes he did.* we can add sound interest through, for example, alliterarion:

Annie ate an apple pie, yes she did.

Sheila sheered the sheep, yes she did.

Billy bought a baby buggy, yes he did.

The phrase almost naturally brings into it a certain synchopated rhythm, which we can exploit through chanting the phrase, i.e., repeating the phrase in a certain rhythm, such as:

Bil	*-ly-bought*	*a-ba*	*-by-bug*	*-gy-yes*	*-he*	*-did.*	
1	*a-2*	*a-3*	*a-4*		*a-1*	*-and*	*2*

We could easily create a melody to add onto the rhythm.

There are several ways we can also add on a kinesthetic dimension to our melodious phrase, by:

clapping to the rhythm while singing the phrase

jumping to the rhythm while singing the phrase

(clapping and jumping in combination)

jumping rope and singing the phrase

creating dance moves to accompany the melody

Note: We can add gestures that reflect the meaning of the phrase, such as "Sheila sheering the sheep" - where we mimic the action of sheering, or have students take turns one being the sheep, the other doing the sheering, while all the students or selected students sing the phrase, which also brings into it an added visual dimension. But notably, in incorporating mime, we are incorporating the meaning of the phrase into the action which, we should be aware, brings in the intellectual realm and is, of course, entirely valid at this point.

Thus, our phrase has been enhanced visually, aurally, and kinesthetically.

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Symbol enhancement and shifting the motivational crux

There is an important effect of situating language fortification from the position of symbol enhancement, which relates to the social realm. Once you get students chanting and dancing, a social milieu is very often created which puts pressure on the group as a whole to participate. Social pressure is created to make students want to avoid being the odd man out who isn't clapping, the social outcast. The underlying motivation does not consist of having to please the teacher, the pressure comes rather from one's social peers which is much more powerful. As teachers, we can exploit this social pressure and structure the activities so that student actions are guided along a path that inevitably leads to language production.

There are other ways to shift the motivational crux. One is by incorporating competition into the activity. The goal becomes winning the game, and language is the necessary means to do so. There are many ways to create competitive games, and these may focus on just the sensorial experience of the symbol, such as if the teacher calls out a phrase, the student has to throw a tennis ball at the correct phrase posted on the wall, or where all the students except one stand individually inside rings placed on the floor, each is assigned a word or phrase, and when their word or phrase is called out, they must run to a different ring.

Competitive games may include an intellectual component where, for example, the students are put into teams for a relay race, and each student runs to a given destination, grabs one word, and when all the students have got their word, the team forms the sentence in the correct word order. Whichever technique is used, language is not posited as the goal in and of itself, it is structurally situated as a tool for the ulterior motive of winning the game, which can be much more motivating for many students.

Even so, there may be students who still refuse to participate, and for these students we can create highly structured exercises we have designated as "no escape" activities. An example is called “Rollie-pollie.” The aim of the exercise is principally aural familiarity with a phrase. All the students lie on the floor (on gym mats) in a row, face down, very close to each other. The teacher has, for example, two phrases "Bobby bought a baby buggy" and "Sheila sheered the sheep", each written out on a large cardboad sheet of paper and places one on one wall and one on the other wall near both ends of the line of student. The teacher, or better a student, calls out one of the phrases, and all the students have to roll in the direction of the spoken phrase. We will naturally situate our difficult students in the middle of the line where not participating in the activity is not an option!

Another kind of "no-escape" activity, which appeals to the visual and kinesthetic senses is where students must lay on the floor to form the letters of the word with their

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bodies. Here, the structure of the activity creates such strong social imposition from peers that it becomes very difficult for students to hang back from participating in the activities.

Final comments

Disengaging the intellect: engaging the body

Analytical versus experiential

Focusing on grammar rules or activities that consolidate the relationship between word and meaning presupposes an analytical approach. We, on the other hand, are arguing here for an "experiential" or "primitive," approach since we are intentionally (albeit temporarily) "disengaging the intellect" by focusing exclusively on the sensorial experience (through any of the senses, sight sound, kinesthetics, etc.) while consciously leaving behind the question of word or phrase meaning. We are stretching out the initial moment of sensorial absorbtion of the symbol. At this point the student is exclusively getting familiar with how the word sounds, how it looks, the rhythm of the sentence, etc. This is a time/space-oriented experience of the symbol - not the intellectual grasping of the logic underlying the grammatical system. As such, this approach is meant to complement, not substitute other approaches: all methods must inevitably lead to the unification of the symbol, its referent, and the grammar system encapsulating it.

This focus echoes other approaches, such as the deductive/inductive contrast in learning acquisition. However, both inductive and deductive orientations focus on getting a handle on the underlying logic of the grammar. Gestalt learners will learn, for example, an entire phrase first and later learn how to dissect it into its component parts: our approach would extend that moment of initial absorption of the phrase through various sensory stimulations. Our method also shares a certain outlook with the TPR method (Total Physical Response, see Asher 1986), which focuses on verbal stimulus (the teacher gives an order, like "Run!" and the students run in response, but the TPR approach also maintains an analytical stance in which the students must have absorbed the symbol-meaning relationship in order to do the action, while our approach is even more "primitive" in the sense that the activities we propose are not precluded on the student having assimilated the symbol-meaning relationship. So we aim to expand the pre-linguistic moment of symbol acquisition before the symbol-referent relationship has been consolidated by the student.

The sensory dimension of the symbol requires a greater time-space investment, that is, it requires more time dedicated to the physical, sensorially experience of the symbol, with concrete physical activities. These are more time involved and space involved than working

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through a textbook of exercises, and veer us away from "efficient" language teaching in the sense of the ideally fastest way to teach a language, which really ends up being not very efficient for many of our students. The real value we need to think of is "effective" which might not be the fastest way, but for some students, it might be the only way. A more "effective" approach for some students may thus include working on symbols initially *deprived* of their meaning, while being *enhanced* in their material sense, which leads us away from language as discourse and brings us closer to language as presentational symbolism, as art, as appeal to the senses.

The way we choose to enhance the symbol would ultimately be influenced by the cognitive-stimulatory pathway (learning style) favored by the student. This brings us into the question of how the process of symbolization is connected into activating the brain through different sensorial pathways and which we hope will be the focus of future studies.

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