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WHAT HAVE TRUTH CONDITIONS TO DO WITH MEANING?

Ahmed B. El Tahir
Introduction:

The quest for a theory of truth and a theory of meaning is by no means new. Like all other philosophical concepts it all started with the great Greek philosophers. We find this quest for a definition of truth in Plato’s ‘Theaetetus’ and ‘Sophist’.

In the Theaetetus Socrates tries to find the difference between true and erroneous belief. First he considers true belief as directed towards what is, while false beliefs are directed towards what is not. This suggestion is rejected on the ground that just as to see or hear what is not is to see or hear nothing, and to see or hear nothing is just not to see or hear at all; so to think what is not is to think nothing, and that is just not to think at all.

In the ‘Sophist’ speech can only be true or false if it is complex - only complete statements are true of false. Plato gives the examples “Theaetetus is sitting down” and “Theaetetus is flying”, where the first is true because Theaetetus is sitting down, and the second is false because he is not flying.

With Aristotle we have further development of this notion. For Aristotle “it is by the facts of the case, by their being or not being so, that a statement is called true or false.” He rejects the idea that statements and opinions count as things, since they may be at one time true, and at another false. For him what is question is the fact outside statements or opinions and by which its truth or falsity is measured.

The verification of statements by facts is for Aristotle a kind of causation. Causation, he says, differs from implication because even when implication is reciprocal we can distinguish the cause from the effect.
“The existence of a man, for instance, implies the truth of the statement in which we assert his existence. The converse is also the case. For if he exists, then the statement in which we assert his existence is true, and conversely, if the statement is which we assert his existence is true, he exists. But the truth of the statement is in no way the cause of his existence, though his existence is in a way the cause of the truth of the statement.”

(Categories, 14b, 15-20).

The first challenge that encountered the ‘correspondence theory’ in its present form came from Eubulides of Megara who invited his hearers to consider a man who says “I am lying” or “what I am now saying is false”. According to the present theory, this is true if it is false and false if it is true. This paradox, usually referred to as the ‘paradox of the liar, was much discussed by both ancient and medieval writers and it was in fact what prompted Tarski to make use of the meta language/object language distinction to cope with this and similar paradoxes.

This line of thought passes to the Stoics, to the Medieval philosophers and logicians and to the 20th Century philosophers and receives further development and modifications that will be beyond the scope of this paper. I stop with Aristotle because Tarski claims that his investigation of the notion of truth “to do justice to the intuitions which adhere to the classical Aristotelian conception of truth... intuitions which find their expression in the well known words of Aristotle’s metaphysics: To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not, is true”¹, and because I believe that Tarski’s definition of truth has nothing to do with the definition Aristotle envisaged. There is an obvious similarity between Tarski’s formulation and that of the Stoics, although it is scarcely likely that the Stoics envisaged their formulation as a recursive definition of truth.

The Stoics held that truth is a property of statements or axiomata, not in the sense of sentences but in the sense of what the sentences state of mean. These axiomata exist independently of their being expressed by sentences and the ‘meanings’ of false sentences exist just as much as the meanings of true ones. The Stoics work is significant not only because in it we encounter the implicit idea of ‘propositions’, but also they were the
first to formulate a definition of truth. To exemplify this I literally copy the example:\(^3\) "Some XY’s is true if and only of there is some true axiomata of the form.” This XY’s “and one of the form ‘p and Q’ is true and only if both of its components are.”

This is by no means the only line of thought to capture the notion of truth. Various other theories with different names (coherent, pragmatic, performative, etc.) are mentioned in the literature.

Again, almost all these celebrated philosophers since Aristotle contributed to the concept of ‘meaning’ and a host of theories of meaning accumulate with different names (naming, denotation, reference, verification, picture, usage, etc.) and none of these philosophers - as far as I know - ever tried to define truth in terms of meaning, or meaning in terms of truth.\(^4\)

**Taski’s Conception of Truth:**

It was Tarski who first envisages a semantic conception of truth and it was on Tarski’s conception that other concrete suggestions concerning meaning and truth were modelled. For this, I shall very briefly adumbrate the extraordinaru precision by which he treated the notion of truth.

The initial aim aof Traski was to give a satisfactoty definition of truth, a definition which is materially adequate and formally correct. He, first, specifies the conditions under which his definition will be adequate. He restricts the application of the term ‘true’ to declarative sentences of a specific language. A sentence, he points out, is true or false as part of some particular language. He, then, states the criterion for the material adequacy of the definition and that is achieved by using the name of the sentence when we want to say something about it, and not the sentence itself. By observing that the logical realtion between a sentence and its name is a relation of equivalence he arrives at his ‘equivalence of the form (T)’

(T) ‘X’ is true if, and only if, P.

He rightly hastens to emphasize that neither the expression (T) itself, nor any particular instance of the form (T) can be regarded as a de-
finition of truth. My usage of the word rightly will become clearer and justified when I come to discuss Davidson’ thesis.

Tarski proposes the name ‘the semantic conception of truth’ for his conception of truth simply because he makes use of the semantic notion of satisfaction; and for this very reason he considers the concept of truth among the concepts of semantics.

Most important “the problem of the definition of truth obtains a precise meaning and can be solved in a rigorous way only for those languages whose structure has been exactly specified. For other languages thus for all natural, ‘spoken’ languages - the meaning of the problem is more or less vague, and its solution can have only an approximate character. Roughly speaking the approximation consists in replacing a natural language (or a portion of it in which we are interested) by one whose structure is exactly specified...”(5) The relation between satisfaction and truth and which justifies the name and makes the definition possible can be illustrated as follows: The object Mary satisfies the formula ‘X is pretty’ if and only if the result of replacing ‘X’ in the formula with a name of Mary, say “mary is pretty” is a true sentence.

Further Tarski argues, a sentence asserting that some sentence S is a true sentence of some language L, cannot itself be a sentence of the language L, but must belong to a metalanguage in which the sentences of L are not used but are mentioned. He is led to this view by the paradox of the liar, the contradiction of which is eliminated if we observe the distinction between object and meta-language. The first is the subject matter for the sentences of which we are seeking to apply the definition of truth, the latter is the one in which we talk about the former, and in terms of which we wish to construct the definition of truth. A further precaution is that the metalanguage must have first, a vocabulary that is determined by previously stated conditions that guarantee the adequacy of a definition of truth which implies all equivalences of the form (T), secondly it must be richer to contain the object language and provide a name for every sentence of it, thirdly it must be richer in its logical part and finally all semantic terms referring to the object language are to be introduced into this metalanguage only for definition. To develop this, Tarski defines sentential functions recursively
and hence he arrives at a definition of truth and falsehood by saying "a sentence is true if it is satisfied by all objects and false otherwise."(6)

Before leaving this very simple sketch of Tarski's famous procedure, a few words about it are not irrelevant.

Although Tarski's main concern is with artificial and formalized languages (generalized deductive system), his work and fundamental achievement is the blending and systematization of the ideas that existed long before him. In formulating his definition he does not seem to distinguish between contingent truth and necessary truth-true is all possible world-truth that is similar to the propositional calculus statement (p or Q) implies (Q or P). The notion of truth for him is absolute truth.

Again, I wonder if artificial languages can have semantics in the sense of intended meaning. And I wonder if 'sentences' as typological forms can have truth values or truth conditions. Earlier I hinted that his theory is not similar or does not do justice to Aristotle's classical theory of truth because for Aristotle facts existed independently of sentences and it is the content of the sentence to which we assign truth value or truth conditions last but not least. I believe the philosophical dispute over 'truth' remains unsettled. Tarski's formulation does not answer the time-worn question "what in general entitles us to say 'it is snowing'.” Yet, the rigour and precision and criterion are significant in their own right. And what I admire most is his precaution and warning that his procedure can't be applied to natural languages. Nevertheless, some philosophers seem to challenge this warning and calim that the truth conditions of a sentence determine its meaning. To this claim I shall address myself presently. I shall confine myself to one major claim namely Davidson's ignoring the claim of Lewis "semantics with no treatment of truth conditions is not semantics",(7) because he states that his proposals are in the tradition of model-theoretic semantics.

Davidson's Criterion:

Davidson, in an illuminating paper "Truth and Meaning, 1967”, offers argument to the effect that a definition of truth which satisfies Tarski's adequacy criterion satisfies a highly plausible adequacy criterion for a
theory of meaning. To quote his own words:

"A theory of meaning for a language L shows 'how the meanings of sentences depend upon the meanings of words' if it contains a (recursive) definition of truth in L." (8) Few lines later he adds: "There is no need to suppress of course the obvious connection between a definition of truth of the kind Tarski has shown how to construct, and the concept of meaning. It is this: the definition... and to give truth conditions is a way of giving the meaning of a sentence." Before I embark on the task of sketching Davidson's analytic argument I recall Tarski's minimum criterion to be satisfied by any theory of truth and to which Davidson refers as Convention T. To arrive at Convention T, we require:

1. For every sentence of L there is probable theorem of our theory of the form: The sentence S of L is true iff p. S is to be replaced by the name of a sentence in any particular instance, and P by a metalanguage sentence for the same sentence.

This requirement implies that our theory provides us with axioms and rules of inference from which we can deduce for any S or L, a corresponding T-sentence. Every probable T-sentence should in fact be true.

How does then Davidson cope with the constraint that for each S of L, it should be possible to prove a corresponding T-sentence?

Davidson begins by asking what we expect a theory of meaning to look like. It has as consequences a set of sentences of the form 'S means M'. This is a minimum requirement. In this scheme S is a structural description of a sentence. He sees the structural description of an expression "as a mere concatenation of elements drawn from a fixed finite list (for example of words or letters)." (9) 'M' is a singular term referring to the meaning of the sentence. "But now having found no more help in meanings of sentences than in meanings of words, let us ask whether we can get rid of the troublesome singular terms supposed to replace 'M' and to refer to meanings." (10)

Davidson's way out is to write 'S means that P' where 'S' is to be replaced by a structural description of a sentence and 'P' by a sentence which is either that sentence itself if the meta-language is richer, or a translation of that sentence into the metalanguage. But this does not take us far; we are still using the intensional 'means that.' The only way to deal with this difficulty is in his own words "simple and radical." (11).
What we are after is a theory which specifies for each sentence a truth condition satisfying Tarski's adequacy criterion in an adequate theory of meaning. For Davidson.

"The theory will have done its work if it provides, for every sentence S in the language under study, a matching sentence (to replace 'P') that, in some way yet to be made, 'gives the meaning' of S. One obvious candidate for (the) matching sentence is just S itself, if the object language is contained in the meta-language, other wise a translation of Sin the meta-language. As a final bold step, let us try treating the position occupied by 'P' extensionall; to implement this, sweep away. The obscure 'mean that', provide the sentence that replaus 'P' with a proper sentential connective, and supply the description that replaces 'S' with its own predicate. The plausible result is

(T) S is T if and only if P.

What we require of a theory of meaning for a language L is that without appeal to any further semantical notions it places enough restrictions on the predicate 'is T' to entail all entences got from Schema T when 'S' is replaced by a structural description of a sentence of L and 'P' by that sentence.

Any two predicates satisfying this condition have the same extension, so if the metalanguage is rich enough, nothing stands in the way of putting what I am calling a theory of meaning into the form of an explicit definition of a predicate 'is T'. But whether explicitly defined or recursively characterized, it is clear that the sentences to which the predicate 'is T' applies will be just the true sentences of L, for the condition we have placed on satisfactory theories of meaning is in essence Tarski's Convetion T that tests the adequacy of a formal semantical definition of truth."(12)

Not only has the path to this point been tortuous but also (with some reservation) unmotivated. Before I paint a picture in black I'd rather show the white side of this formulation. The virtues of Davidson's conception of a theory of meaning are first, it provides us with a way of giving the slogan "The meaning of an expression is a function of the meaning of its parts" a precise and non-metaphorical sense. And second, by providing us with an idea of how to solve them, it provides us with a sharp conception of the problems posed for semantic theories by what
Chomsky calls 'creative language use'."(13)

The dependence of the meaning of the whole on the meaning of the parts accounts for the fact that we are capable of learning a language with no upper bound on the number of possible sentences. A theory of truth which must provide proofs of infinitely many T-sentences, shows how this is possible.

Now I have three different lines of argument against this bold novel claim: the first, I shall label philosophical, the second empirical, and the third formal.

First a theory of the kind advocated leaves the whole question of what individual words mean where it was, and the concept of meaning, meaning relations, i.e. synonyms, antonyms etc. are reduced to nothing. What does this approach contribute to our understanding of the nature of language and hence to the nature or the human being? What is the relation between language and thought and both to reality? Does the theory reveal anything new about the conditions under which a sentence of 'its content' is true? Does it make these conditions clearer than the sentence itself does? And does the theory as a theory of meaning bring the semantic character of language into the right philosophical perspective?

A theory that purports to give the meanings of the expressions in some particular area of language (mini language) does not provide this perspective.

To reduce our linguistic behaviour, our beliefs, our intentions, our emotions, our virtues and vices, all our psychological makeup, to truth conditions is untenable. However, the theory proposed does not claim any philosophical insight or relevance and I shall say no more about this.(14)

Secondly, what I called empirical argument is also discussed by Davidson and he puts it in the question: What are the prospects of a formal semantical theory of a natural language? According to Tarski, very poor and had it been possible, Tarski would have certainly said it. I already quoted Tarski's own reservations which I shall title as Syntax, Semanitcs and Indecivablity. But what made Davidson show this
optimism? The answer is not far. "Recent work by Chomsky and others is doing much to bring the complexities of natural languages within the scope of serious semantic theory. To give an example: Suppose success in giving the truth conditions for some significant range of sentences in the active voice. Then with a formal procedure for transforming each such sentence into a corresponding sentence in the passive voice, the theory of truth could be extended in an obvious way to this new set of sentences."\(^{(15)}\)

Well, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and indeed the proof of the right theorem rests with the validity of Chomsky's claim. Before I come to have my share in refuting Chomsky's calim, I must say that Davidson admits that he has no answer for Tarski's second reservation-semantic namely semantic paradoxes. We can't formulate a true sentence in the language that contains the predicate 'is true' - with self referential sentences. So this problem remains intact.

Now, do transformations really preserve meaning? If so Davidson's claim is safe, if not we have to wait for some other bolder claim.

In 'Syntactic Structures' Chomsky derived pairs like: "John saw Mary" and "John didn't see Mary" from a common underlying structure "John past see Mary." If the semantic rules took only the 'deep structure' into account they would fail to assign distinct meaning to these sentences.

Similarly, "John saw Mary" and "Did John see Mary?" were derived from the same underlying structure and the difference in mood crucial to the meaning was introduced by transformations. Worse still and to meet Davidson with his own choice of passive-active sentence, I take these two simple sentences:

1. John must kiss mary. (Focus on John).
2. Mary must be kissed by John. (Focus on Mary).

Passive is a syntactic rule that applies after the (D.S.) but we have different meaning and I see no point in postulating two different senses for 'must' here.

Again, with quantifiers, the hopes and claims of the (T.G) grammarians are shattered. Consider:

3. Everyone has told at least one lie.
4. At least one lie has been told by everyone.
To save space I round this part off with the classical examples. Tough movement with quantifiers and passive-active with quantifiers.

5a. It is hard to please everyone.
5b. Everyone is hard to please.
6a. Many men love few women.
6b. Few women are loved by many men.
7a. Many arrows didn’t hit the target.
7b. The target was not hit by many arrows.

Nobody would want to claim that the pairs of sentences have the same meaning or have the same truth conditions. And no one would dare say that we can have one T-sentence for say sentences (5a & 5b), or (7a & 7b).

To follow this and show the problems that faced the interpretive semanticist, is to present all the convincing arguments and evidence presented by the Generative Semanticist, which will be beyond my aim. I therefore confine myself to the example cited by Davidson.

Now, as for the third reservation of Tarski, namely Indexicality I mention few examples for the sake of illustration, although this is a serious problem for the claim.

The fact is that, the vast majority of the expressions used in natural languages to refer to individuals are not unique in their references. We can’t say a sentence like “I put it over there yesterday” expresses a true or a false proposition unless we know who the speaker is, and what ‘it’ refers to and where it was put and when it was put. And yet we can’t say that the sentence is ambiguous or meaningless. “If we wish to take account of the fact that the truth-value of the proposition expressed may vary according to the time and place of utterance, we must have some means of indexing the objects in the world and associating these indices with the expressions that occur in sentences. What this implies, in effect, is that the interpretation of a sentence, on any given occasion of its utterance, will be determined jointly by its meaning and by what has come to be called its point-of-reference or (index).”, (16)

As for this gnawing problem Davidson suggests first to treat demonstratives as constants and then admits that the theory needs a “fairly far-reaching revision” (17) and it will entail sentences like the following:
"‘I am tired’ is true as (potentially spoken by p at T if and only if p is tired at T.)"\(^{(18)}\) That is to say (VP) (VT) (‘I am tired’ is true for P at T iff P is tired at T.).

True is seen now as a relation between sentences people and times and not a predicate of sentence. Davidson is undoubtedly underestimating the indexicality of natural languages. If we take all dexis, tense and indecis we get a very long list indeed. But it must be allowed that a staggering list of difficulties and conundrums remains. To name a few: ..."\(^{(19)}\) and he names as many as ten formidable problems. What is left as non-problematic and can easily be catered for by the theory is indeed very small.

Now I come to the last of my three-fold argument namely the formal side of the theory.

Unfortunately, I can’t see why Davidson reduces meaning ‘means that’ to ‘truth’ if and only if. Is truth more intelligible than meaning, or is it the fact that we now have a sketch of a rigorous theory of truth? Why don’t we equate meaning with grammaticality instead of truth?

After purging his theory from the intensional expression ‘means that’ he implies that his constraint is that language must be purely extensional. He wants to go from intensional language to canonical notation and by canonical notation he meant something like predicate logic. (Calculus).

Isn’t it wrong to equate truth and meaning as shown by the following example:

1. “Schnee is t Weiss” is true if and only if grass is green. What I knew, if I knew sentence 1, would be true but I would not be able to translate ‘Schnee is t Weiss’. We can’t just interchange ‘is tru iff’ and ‘means that’. In fact to secure this equivalence of the schema ‘S means that P’ and ‘S is T iff P’ where ‘is T’ is a predicate which applies to true sentences, we need a third condition not mentioned by Davidson namely.

If it is a T theory it entails translates.

(P translates S into the meta-language.)

Davidson might have thought that Tarski’s two conditions will satisfy the third condition. But we have to exclude the case where, for some structural description ‘S’, ‘S means that P’ is true whatever sentence replaces P. Following N. Jardine then with this additional condition the argument can be made explicit as follows. Let’s denote the schema ‘s
means that p' by*. Further let's assume that the position occupied by 'P' in* is extensional. The following four cases only can arise for any particular substitution for 'S'.
1. * is true whatever sentence is substituted for 'P';
2. * is false whatever sentence is substituted for 'P';
3. * has the same truth value as whatever sentence is substituted for 'P';
4. * has the opposite truth value to whatever sentence is substituted for 'P'.

Condition three excludes 1. The assumption that * is true when the sentence replacing 'P' is that specified by the structural description replacing 'S' excludes 2. If we define 'is T' as a predicate of sentences such that S is T if case (3) holds then 1 and 2 are excluded, S not T only if case (4) holds. It follows that * is equivalent to 'S is T iff P' for all substitutions of structural descriptions for 'S' and sentences for 'P'.

Now does this guarantee that we can equate intensional predicates with extensional predicates? Again following Martin Atkinson, let us have a theory 0 which has a consequence sentences of the form

S is T iff P;
If we have the two formal constraints then we have
S mean that P = (E 0 LT0 S is T iff P.)
If we have a 0 for French in English and that 0 has an axiom, 'la neige est blanche' is true iff snow is white and if we have a clause that looks into the structure
x satisfies 'neige' iff x is snow and also the 0 includes.
'la neige est blanche' is true iff snow is white and 2+2 = 4.
This conjoined sentence is as true as the first (It satisfies the formal conditions).

Are we justified then to say 'la neige est blanche' means snow is white and 2+2 = 4?

Joining two true sentences
'S' is true iff 'P' and 'R'
do not mean that 'S' means ('P' = 'R').

Again, connectives; 'and', 'or' are always given a minimum meaning in formal logic. Such that any complex formulated by the use of them alone is a truth function of its constituent. Thus (P, Q) does not differ
from \((Q, P)\) and similarly \((P \lor Q)\) is equivalent to \((Q \land P)\). But with natural languages connectives have a richer meaning. For example with ‘and’ we have temporal succession. Thus “Brutus stabbed Caesar and drew his dagger” is different form “Brutus drew his dagger and stabbed Caesar.” And “She wrote her will and shot herself” is acceptable, but “She shot herself and wrote her will” is semantically deviant.

With sentences like:

The sentence “snow is white and grass is green” is true iff snow is white and grass is green we have no problem. But not all the sentences are of the form.

If sentences \(x\) is true if and only if \(P\),

and sentences \(b\) is true if and only if \(Q\),

then sentence \((x, b)\) is true iff \((P, Q)\)

are of simple ‘snow, and ‘grass’ example.

However, we get our \(T\) sentences we need a general rule to derive a \(T\)-sentence for complex and compound sentences and as I exemplified not all compound or conjoined sentences have the same structural description with connectives.

It seems that in order to establish the model-theoretic approach as a theory of meaning for natural languages, we have to assume many more things and to include these we render our theory a complex formulation. This approach fails, I believe because it ignores these factors, it ignores the sort of study that concerns the conditions for the performance and recognition of speech acts, assertions, commands, warnings, etc. If it is to be more than an exercise in translation it must be able to tell us the circumstances in which a proposition is true or false because to understand a proposition means to know the case if it is true as Wittgenstein says. Otherwise we are in square one and it seems we are as we listen to Davidson: “Even if everything I have said in defence of my formulation of what suffices for interpretation is right, it remains the case that nothing strictly constitutes a theory of meaning. A theory of truth, no matter how well selected is not a theory of meaning, while the statement that a translational theory entails certain facts, is not because of the irreducible indexical elements in the sentences that express it, a theory in the formal sense.”

(20)
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I am indebted to professor M. At Kinison for reading an earlier version of this paper and making very useful comments.

.2 - Tarski: The Semantic Conception of Truth. (343).
.3 - Encyclopaedia of Philosophy II. p. 225.
.4 - Some philosophers required a theory of truth for meaning but none claimed truth to be meaning. Wittgenstein’s “picture forms of fact”.
.5 - Tarski: Semantic Conception of Truth. (347).
.6 - Tarski: Semantic Conception of Truth. (3530).
.7 - D. Lewis: General Semantics. p. 169.
.8 - Davidson: Truth and Meaning. p. 313.
* (Underlining mine.)
.14 - I deliberately leave out the sound claims of Quine and ‘speech-act’ advocates.
.18 - Ibid.
Implications of a Cross-Cultural Study
for
Arab EFL Students

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Introduction

There is no doubt that, for most students, the aim of learning a foreign language is the acquisition of a functional knowledge of it. Hence, the usefulness of a theory underlying language learning is determined by the degree to which it enables the learner to functionally use the language in various situations. Judged by this criterion, even the most thorough structural approach, that is to say, transformational grammar, which underlies important language learning theories fails to provide the language learner and the language teacher with an account of 'the linguistic habits that actually enable a language user to speak and understand the language' (Carroll, 1971: p. 107). Carroll further observes that 'The transformational theory of competence as it has developed thus far presents itself as mainly a set of abstractions that may or may not relate to actual linguistic behavior...'

Recent work in the area of linguistics has drawn attention to the communicative functions of language; The notion of grammatical competence has thus given way to the notion of communicative competence on the principle that the language user is not concerned with producing grammatically well-formed utterances, but is equally keen on producing semantically well-formed and appropriate utterances. The soundness of this view of language structure is noted by Chafe (1970: p. 84) as follows:

An adequate theory of language needs to be semantically based,... nothing but superficial understanding of language will ever be possible unless we view semantic structure as the area in which the well-formedness of sentence is determined...

1. Chomsky pointed by denied the claim that his linguistitic theory included or specifically implied a language teaching methodology. However, in Aspects Chomsky mad it clear that he was challenging behaviouristic theories of language acquisition.
The Aim of the Study

It has been observed that many of our students who have acquired the grammatical rules of English are still unable to use the language effectively. To remedy this situation Jacobson (1976: p. 411) suggests that

The learner of a foreign language, if he truly strives for proficiency in the target language, must obviously go beyond the mere knowledge of its phonological and grammatical rules and internalize in addition the communicative rules that tell him how the code becomes alive in a given situation."

It has also been observed that many of the errors made by our Arab EFL students are the result of the differences between the semantic structures of English and Arabic.

Contrastive studies have, so far, largely been concerned with linguistic form. But the nature of language is obviously more complex than this relatively simple view. Language use involves a knowledge of the situations in which these forms are used. It is, therefore necessary for contrastive studies to go beyond linguistic form to handle the more subtle and equally significant aspect of language use, that is, its semantic structure. As Oller (1971: pp. 164-165) has stated:

Clear evidence that linguistic theory has in fact encouraged an emphasis on physical structure, often at the expense of meaning, is found in the vast literature on contrastive studies done at the phonemic, morphemic and syntactic levels. By contrast there is an extremely sparse literature in applied linguistics on the semantic and pragmatic aspects of language.

In the light of the above observations this study aims to provide a framework for comparing the semantic structures of English and Arabic.

Culture and Language

It is a truism that culture and language are intimately interrelated. To acquire the ability to use a language one needs to acquire a knowledge of the culture in which the language serves as a medium of commu-
nication. Culture gives language its meaning as it determines all the native speaker's experiences. It is, therefore, quite evident that comparable linguistic forms in different languages may convey slightly or completely different meanings. This is true even in the case of what may be thought as the most simple linguistic forms which appear quite obvious and self-explanatory to the speakers of a given language. The meanings of such linguistic forms may appear quite strange to the speakers of another language because they have experiences rooted in a different culture.

Since the EFL learners have experiences rooted in a different culture, they are therefore, expected to face some difficulty in acquiring the new culture and the characteristic ways in which it manifests itself through the foreign language, i.e., the semantic structure of the foreign language. This natural tendency on the part of the EFL learner is, unfortunately, reinforced by certain teaching methods and techniques which tend to overemphasize the grammatical forms at the expense of the semantic (communicative) functions underlying the grammatical forms.

A Framework for Contrasting the Semantic Structures of English and Arabic

The semantic structures of languages show remarkable differences, as Driven (1976: p. 2) observes in the following quotation:

'Although basically the same phenomena occur and the same experiences are suffered in all cultures, it is astonishing that all cultures organize these impressions and experiences into slightly or radically different concepts, as we experience the effect in their languages.

The framework below for contrasting the semantic structures of English and Arabic which uses only a few examples of the types of semantic differences between English and Arabic aims to provide a model for contrasting the two cultures and a frame of reference for textbook writers as well as teachers of English. Before getting into some of the ways in which the semantic structures of the two languages are manifested, however, let us look at the two cultures in which the two languages function since, as has already been stated, language and culture are inseparable. The topics contrasted below include the family, personal re-
relationships, food and drink, social customs and habits.

The Family

The most characteristic feature of 'the family' in the Arabic and English cultures concerns its size. Thus where the idea of the large or "extended" family is very common in the Arabic culture, it is, on the other hand, quite rare (nay, almost nonexistent) in England and the U.S.A., where parents will not be surprised to see their sons and daughters who are able to support themselves getting ready to leave the family home and lead an independent life. This does not usually happen in Arab families, where most parents believe that they are morally and financially responsible to support their children until they finish their education and even sometimes beyond that. Furthermore, many parents may even welcome the idea of having their children stay with them after they get married. The Arab family may also, of course, include other members such as the parents' parents and the parents-in-law, i.e. an extended family.

Personal Relationships

A look at the parent-child relationship in the two cultures will also reveal significant differences. The main feature of this relationship in the Arab culture is its formality in comparison with the informal nature of the same relationship in the contemporary English and American cultures. The Arab parent usually expects his son or daughter to carefully choose his or her words while talking to him. An American son or daughter, on the contrary, can be very informal while talking to his or her parent. Thus credible conversation between an American father who is not happy about the life his son is leading and his son, who has left home, might sound as follows:

Father: You seem to spend all your time in discos.
Son: Look, how I spend my time is my business!
Father: But where do you go evey evening?
Son: Look, where I go every evening is my business!
(Abbs/Freebarin, 1982: p. 13)

A rather similar situation is represented in the student teacher relationship. There is again more formality in Arabic schools and universities. The teacher and the university professor are very exalted persons in Arabic culture. On the other hand, American and English students are somewhat informal with their teacher and professors. Thus they may sometimes call them by their first names and go to parties together. To an Arab, calling a teacher or a university professor by his first name is very impolite and may even be considered an insult. Moreover, Arab teachers and university professors do not usually accept invitations to parties with their students, as this may arouse suspicions of one sort or another.

Food and Drink

Kinds of food and customs of eating differ in most cultures. Such kinds and customs may sometimes reveal significant differences between one culture and another, as is the case with the Arabic and English-or-American culture, where certain kinds of food and drink are forbidden in one culture but not the other. For example, 'pork' and 'alcohol' are forbidden in the Arabic culture on religious grounds but not in the English or American cultures. Certain eating customs also reveal contrasts between the two cultures. For example, the main, i.e. the heaviest, meal for an Arab is /gada', which is usually eaten at home with the family in the early afternoon after returning form the entir day's work. The equivalent to this word in English is usually given as 'lunch', which is, however, a light mean that is usually eaten at midday, with four more hours left in the work day. The Anglo-American heavy meal is usually had in the late afternoon and is called dinner, but dinner is also served in the early afternoon on sundays and holidays, in which case, lunch (sometimes called supper) is served later in the day.

Social Customs and Habits

Other suxctoms and habits differ also in the two cultures. Many American and English people are fond of raising pets, a practice which
has given rise to the proverb 'love me love my dog'. Arabs, on the other hand, typically look on pets as dirty animals which should not be allowed in their houses. Still other customs and habits that signal other differences are represented by the following scenes from Arabic culture:

(A) In Mr. Mohamed's Office

Mr. Mohamed and Mr. Ahmed are sitting close together in the former's private office and are involved in a very serious discussion. Suddenly Mr. Hussein, who knows Mr. Mohamed, enters the office and after greeting the two interlocutors gets directly involved in a discussion with Mr. Mohamed, forgetting that he has interrupted the discussion that was going on. Such behavior is accepted as normal in the Arab world and gives no cause for resentment. Indeed, resentment might be stirred up by not greeting the two, discussion or no discussion.

(B) An Invitation for Lunch

Mr. Mohamed has invited Mr. Ahmed to take lunch with him at home. Mr. Ahmed arrives and lunch is served. Mr. Mohamed, the host, keeps encouraging his guest to make himself at home and insists that he take more food. Mr. Ahmed, the guest is very pleased with his host's attitude and leaves quite satisfied and thankful.

(C) An Appointment

Mr. Mohamed and Mr. Ahmed have agreed to meet. At the appointed time and place Mr. Mohamed arrives and waits for Mr. Ahmed, who finally arrives fifteen minutes late without any gesture of concern for the inconvenience that he has caused his friend.

Now let us see what is likely to happen in the corresponding situation in the English or American culture. In situation (A), stated above, an American or an English person is likely to remain silent and at a distance until Mr. Mohamed recognizes him or until the discussion with Mr. Ahmed is over. In situation (B) an American or English host does not usually encourage his guest or insist that he eat more as his guest does not usually expect him to do this. If he did, it might make his guest feel ill at ease. But the guest is always Welcome to help himself to (or ask
for) more food. In situation (C) a person aculturated to an English or an American way of life will usually arrive on time without causing any inconvenience to others. If he arrives late, he will apologize and offer a good excuse.

It should be noted taht although the two cultures differ in many ways, as suggested by the above examples, yet they share musch in common and, like differences, similarities cover numerous cultural topics.

**Idioms**

One of the ways in which cultures clearly manifest themselves through language is that which is linguistically called ‘idioms’. Idioms are linguistic structures that are deeply rooted in the cultures in which they occur. To understand idioms one must understand the cultural settings in which they are used, since the meaning of an idiom cannot be predicted from the meanings of the individual words, as represented by the idiom ‘let the cat out od the bag’, which occurs in sentences such as ‘Inspite of all our warnings, Helen started chatting to KJohn and finally she let the cat out of the  bag’. This sentence has nothing to do with a cat or a bag in the usual sence. It means that Helen revealed something to John that was supposed to have been kept secret.

It has been stated above that idioms are part of the cultures in which they are used. It is, therefore, natural to find that two idioms which express the same meaning in two languages use completely different images, as in the case of the following English and Arabic idioms which mean that ‘the calsh of different views can be harmful’:

Too many cooks spoil the broth.

/ilmarkib um rayyiseyn tigra'/
a boat with two-pilots sinks

Thus whereas the Englishman uses an image derived from home life, an Arab uses an image derived from nautical life to express the same meaning. Learning idioms, therefore, is one of the stumbling blocks for
EFL learners. It is sometimes possible to find similar or partially similar idioms in English and Arabic, as exemplified by the following idioms:

A drowning man will clutch at a straw.

/ilgariq yit9allaq biqassa/
a-drowning-man he-clutches at a-straw

A cat with nine lives

/qitta bisab9 tirwah/
a-cat with-seven lives

But such coincidences are very rare; the larger number of idioms in any language are culture specific.

Although idioms occur in most languages, they are more common in some languages than others. They are certainly less common in some tongues than in English which, in addition to the type of idioms already discussed, contains a large number of phrasal verbs that have idiomatic meanings, as in the case of the verb ‘get’, which can combine with a large number of particles to express different meanings, such as ‘get about’, ‘get across’ ‘get ahead’, ‘get along’, ‘get around’, ‘get at’, ‘get away’, ‘get back’, ‘get by’, ‘get down’, ‘get in’, ‘get it’, ‘get nowhere’, ‘get off’, ‘get on’, ‘get out’, ‘get over’, ‘get through’, ‘get to’, ‘get together’, ‘get up’, and ‘get with’.

Such phrasal verbs, which are not common in Arabic, have always constituted a problem for Arabic speaking EFL students. It is essential that the students understand the nature of these idiomatic phrases and how they differ from ordinary phrases before they are asked to use them.

Connotations

In addition to idioms, English and Arabic have a large number of words and expressions which acquire various connotations in various contexts, thus ‘pig’ can mean ‘dirty’, ‘woman’ can mean ‘weak’, ‘give a hand’ means ‘help’ and a ‘new hand’ means ‘a new worker’. Interestingly enough, these particular connotations occur in both English and Arabic
and, therefore, are not likely to cause any difficulty for the EFL learner. This does not, of course, suggest that all such “parallel” words in the two languages have the same connotations, for it is certainly possible, if not easy to find that certain words of equivalent denotations do not have the same connotations. For example, the Arabic equivalent to the word ‘turkey’, which in English may connote ‘a foolishly proud person’ has no such connotation in Arabic. Nevertheless, such connotations are not likely to cause a big problem for EFL student since the denotative equivalences together with a given social context will often elicit the requisite intuitive leap.

Ambiguous Forms and Other Conceptual Differences

An ambiguous form is one that expresses a variety unrelated meanings, as in the case of ‘bark’, which could mean ‘a three masted vessel, ‘the noise made by a dog’ or ‘the protective layer around a tree’. English and Arabic contain a large number of such ambiguous forms. Examples of problematic forms (where one language uses one form to express different meanings that are matched only by a set of different meanings that are matched only by a set of different linguistic. forms in the other language) are numerous in both languages. An example from Arabic is /9ain/, which can mean among other things ‘eye’, ‘evil eye’, ‘hole’ and ‘source of water’.

Ambiguous forms in English constitute a source of difficulty for the EFL learner. The difficulty lies in the learner’s attempt to associate these totally unrelated meanings to the same form. Another sources of difficulty is represented by Arabic ambiguous forms which are matched with different forms representing meanings in the foreign language. The EFL learner who naturally tends to translate the concepts of his native language to the foreign language may use only one form in the foreign language to cover the range of meanings that the corresponding form represents in Arabic. For example, instead of saying ‘old man’, ‘the eve of the examination’ and ‘submitted to’, many students will say ‘big man’ ‘the night of the examination’ and ‘introduced to’, which are English mistranslations of the corresponding Arabic form /rajul kabir/, /laylat limtiyan/ and /muqaddam ila/ respectively. Even if the learner is aware
of the existence of two or more forms in the foreign language, he may not be certain of the meaning that each one of these forms represents and may, therefore, confuse the use of one form with the other. This natural tendency on the part of the learner to transfer the concepts of his native language to the foreign language is based on the learner's (false) assumption that the native and the foreign language use the same devices or concepts to mark the same underlying meaning distinctions.

Languages differ markedly in the ways in which meaning distinctions are expressed. This is not only restricted to the use of ambiguous forms in one language or another but also extends to many phrases and expressions which appear quite straightforward to native speakers, but to the speakers of another language may appear rather strange or unfamiliar. For example, whereas English uses two concepts to express the meaning 'get sick', Arabic uses only one concept to express the same meaning, that is, ымрад/. But each language uses two concepts to express the meaning represented by the equivalent expressions 'to catch cold' and/ يساب bibrard/. However, a comparison of these equivalent expressions reveals some interesting differences in the way each language expresses this underlying meaning. First of all, the word /yusab/ is not the equivalent to the word 'catch'. Second, the subject nouns in sentences using these equivalent expressions, for example,

/Nora caught cold/
/Nora usibat bibrard/
Nora she-was-hit by-cold

play different semantic roles. Thus, Nora is the semantic agent in the English sentence and the semantic patient or object in the Arabic sentence. Such conceptual differences in expressing the same underlying meanings are usually the source of errors since many learners see to resort to translation from the native language to the foreign language and vice versa as a way of producing and understanding utterances. Accordingly many of their translations will be puzzling and possibly highly amusing.

Related Meanings of Different Terms

While a word may express a variety of unrelated meanings, different

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2. In some colloquial varieties, e.g. Egyptian Arabic the equivalent word to 'catch' is /yaxud/ which literally means 'to take'.
words may express similar or very close meanings as in the case of pairs of words such as: help, aid; buy, purchase; world, universe; pass away, die; hide, conceal; turn down refuse, sharp, acute, etc., although it is sometimes argued that the above pairs of words are not exactly similar in meaning and that there are no real synonyms. A word, therefore, may be more colloquial than another as in the case of the pairs: turn down, refuse and pass away, die. A word may also be more general, more professional, etc. than another.

Acquiring such subtle distinctions of the meanings of words is a great challenge to the language learner. It is, therefore, important not introduce such words early in the language program. It is also important to view such pairs of words as a way of enriching the learners’s style in the advanced stages of language learning. Positive transfer from the native language is also possible, here, since to may well contain matching subtleties such as:

/mat/ pass away /tuwufiya/ die
/9alam/world /kawn/universe
/yuxfi/hide yuxabi’/conceal

which can provide support to the EFL learner.

**Lexical Meaning**

One of the main tasks of the language learner is that of acquiring the meanings of words and one of the methods of learning the meanings of words is, of course, that or using a dictionary (monolingual or bilingual). But the use of dictionaries involves some problems. The use of dictionaries is not possible at the early stages of language learning, a fact that looms even leager when the two languages employ different alphabets. Second, most dictionaries do not contain a full coverage of the range of meaning, of a word, especially in the case of less common and apparently idiomatic meanings, as in the case of those meanings which are largely determined by the situational contexts in which the words and sentences are used. Dictionaries (like many grammarians) tend to consider the meanings of linguistic forms in isolation from the situations in which they are used. Third, one of the problems of bilingual dic-
tionaries is that the range of meanings that different languages posit for comparable linguistic forms varies considerably form one language to another, as has already been stated. Thus, although ‘wine’ and /xamr/ have equivalent denotations in English and Arabic, the two words do not have exactly the same connotative meanings to the native speakers of English and Arabic. Part of the meaning of the word /xamr/ is that it is forbidden in Arabic culture, but ‘wine’ has little of this in the preponderant English culture. Another such example is ‘pork’, and its Arabic equivalent /xanzir/. The differences between such seemingly equivalent words are mainly due to cultural differences.

**Formal and Informal Styles**

In addition to the various differences that have been discussed, the use of the appropriate style represents another potential stumbling block to the language learner. Choice of the appropriate style depends on the situation. For instance, in a formal situation people usually choose their word more carefully. Formal style reflects a distant relationship between the speech interlocutors. On the other hand, informal style reflects intimacy and familiarity. The importance of using the appropriate style in the appropriate situation is noted by Jacobson (1976 p. 415):

*Stylistic shifting, especially situational switching, is an important element of social interaction and the use of a style that is inappropriate in given situation is likely to offend the addressee who expects his addressee to know what the norms of social interaction of his cultural group are. This is where learners of a foreign language are most deficient.*

English and Arabic show differences with regard to the use of appropriate styles in the same situation. Thus a formal style in one language in a certain situation may not be acceptable in a similar situation in the other language. A good example is represented by the previous conversation between a father and his son. Such a conversation strikes the Arabic reader as being unacceptable because of the informal way in styles of this kind are very much the result of cultural differences. Jacobson (1976. p. 415) draws attention to the problem that EFL learner faces with regard to using the appropriate style as follows:
The traditional foreign language course and that is equally true for EFL - Only stresses the learning of the code, that is the grammar, the pronunciation, the vocabulary as it refers to a single style in which colloquial and formal features come together almost at random. Hence, the learner of the foreign language, because of this uni-stylistic training, speaks the same way to peers and college professors, to children and adults, to boys and girls. We still have not succeeded in incorporating, into EFL materials, the knowledge that the awareness of different styles is as important for the learner as is his proficiency in grammatical and phonological rules.

Difference in style between the native languages and the foreign language are likely to affect the EFL learner’s ability to use the appropriate style in the foreign language and, hence, they should be noted by EFL textbook writers and teachers.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Since language derives its meaning from the cultural settings in which it is used, it is extremely important that the language learner learn linguistic utterances in their proper cultural settings. It also follows that teaching methods which tend to overemphasize the linguistic forms without creating enough situations for the language learner to engage in are found inadequate and insufficient for proper learning to take place. Textbooks and teaching methods should provide the learner with enough learning opportunities and activities to give meaning to the learned material and learning experience in general. Learning activities should include, in addition to classroom activities, out of class activities with special attention to the semantic needs of the learner.

Since cultural contexts cannot be discarded in the process of learning and using a foreign language and since cultural categories of the foreign and native language differ significantly, it becomes necessary for the language learner to understand that differences between the native language and the foreign language are natural and should, therefore, be tolerated. But it is equally important for the language learner to realize that cultures and languages have much in common and that the similarities may outweigh the differences in many cases.
Since the native language and the foreign language have many phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic differences, the EFL learner who is faced with all of these differences will naturally resort to his native language resources for help. Much transfer from the native language to the foreign language occurs through the learner’s attempt to translate the concepts of the native language to the foreign language. This natural tendency is responsible for many of the errors committed by the EFL learner and should, therefore, be discouraged and, if possible, eliminated. Accordingly, textbook and EFL teachers should not encourage translation from the native language to the foreign language. This is not to suggest that translation should be excluded completely, because translation from the foreign language to the native language can be sometimes very helpful and useful in getting the meaning across to the learner.
Bibliography


Realistic Narrator and Fantastic Protagonist: A Formal Ambiguity in American Literature

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First person narration has been a common technique in American Literature. This personal element has helped distinguish American fiction from European. In fact there are certain type of American novels and stories, especially those which might be loosely termed "realistic romances", in which the narrator plays an absolutely central role, and it is the ambiguities of this role which seem to hold the very key to interpretation. In realistic romances - many of the works of Melville, Hawthorne, Poe, Fitzgerald and Hemingway fall in this category - the narrator is burdened with the double responsibility of determining (directly or indirectly) the moral focus of the story, on the one hand, retaining credibility, on the other. Indeed, how else might we link the Gothic fantasy of Poe with the tight-lipped realism or Hemingway if not through an ambiguous narrator and a realism-fantasy aesthetic? Might not the progress of a Hemingway figure like Frederic Henry be in fact a heroic fantasy, and do not the fantasies of Poe strain after credibility? It is a question of the formal mechanics of the serious romance genre in America, a genre in which imagination and reason, fantasy and fact, seem to get into an almost inextricable and often quite confusing dialectic. The result is an ambiguous mix of literalness and symbolism, of realism and fantasy. The narrator often tells us something that is imaginatively true and requires our moral approbation (or otherwise) but in which we can't logically believe on a realistic level. The narrator often endorses what the plot says (an imaginative, if not melodramatic, link) but doing so usually places a strain on logic and credibility.

This is the case with both ISHMAEL IN Moby Dick and and Nick Carraway in The Great Gatsby in that their imaginative sympathies extend to their fantastic and absurd protagonists and thence to the whole 'fantastic' plot structure itself while at the same time they have an
urgent need to insist upon the truth and reality of what happened. For instance, in *Moby Dick*, this mixture of realism and fantasy makes the narrator’s role one fraught with ambiguity, because Ishmael is being forced to be ‘realistic’ about ‘fantastic’ events. Ishmael’s realism is reinforced by his pertinacity with regard to whaling facts (although this is ‘fantastically’ overdone) and his brilliant conjectures about event and character that demonstrates an acutely real and aware intelligence. On the other hand these insights often derive from imaginative speculations of a ‘melodramatic’ kind and Ishmael’s own melodramatic imagination accords well with the melodramatic nature of the whole story. Both narrator and plot are prepared to be ‘fantastic’. Thus imaginatively there is an intimate link between narrator and plot. However in terms of realism and logic there is a tension between the two because how on earth can Ishmael expect us to believe what he is saying is true and really happened? In American literature narrators get caught in a credibility gap, their imaginations and their rationality running in opposite directions.

The same happens to Nick Carraway in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. Carraway is wholly necessary because it is his exaggerated appreciation of Gatsby that goes a long way towards forcing us to see him in the same light, a perspective we might not otherwise have been inclined to adopt. This is because it is the idea of Gatsby - what he represents - that Carraway is handing us, but we, as literalists, are responding to the real person we meet in the pages of the book. As usual, then, this tension, if not breach, between realism and fantasy sets up all kinds of ambiguities. Carraway can be quite misleading in that his desire for a world “in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever”, for rigid moral rules, contradicts with his sententiousness about the immoral Gatsby himself, just as his revelation of Gatsby’s absurdity and artificiality - his fantastic contradictions and unreality - contradicts with his praise of him as being “better than the whole damn bunch put together”. It is this ambiguous dialogue between realism and fantasy in American literature that gives the narrator his central significance.

However, placing such an emphasis on the narrator practically involves an alternative plot structure that must be read simultaneously with the traditionally recognised one. For it involves saying that the
informing relationship in a story (the conflict on which the plot is built) is not just that between the protagonist and the world around him, but it may also be that between the protagonist and the narrator himself. Or to put this another way, it may be between the narrator and the events instead of between the leading characters. Do we focus on the ‘objective story’ or the relationship between the narrator and events? The so-called ‘novel journalism’ of Norman Mailer is a contemporary reminder of this recurring question in American literature. However, the purpose of this paper is to examine two American short stories which illustrate the kind of process which I have described above. These are Melville’s Bartleby, in which the lawyer’s assessment of Bartleby hangs on the question of Bartleby’s ‘real’ or ‘fantastic’ existence, and Edgar Allan Poe’s The Fall of The House Of Usher, where the narrator tries to see his experiences as real events, and is trapped in the ambiguity of being a real person talking rationally about a literary fantasy of which he is a part. In Melville’s Bartleby the lawyer perpetually shifts between an imaginative and literalistic view of the fantastic Bartleby. While, in Poe’s The Fall of The House Of Usher, the narrator insists upon a purely literalistic view and is overwhelmed by the fantasy: the imaginative implications of the plot structure are endorsed by default, by an opposition that can only be read ironically, i.e. the narrator is real but the protagonist is fantastic. In both these stories there is that realism fantasy dialectic which undermines simplistic interpretations by its inherent ambiguities: the reader doesn’t quite know what ground he is standing on. But inevitably the final pull seems to be towards romance and symbolism and away from realism.

It may be objected that the enormous emphasis placed on the role of the narrator in these two stories is because the narrator is also a major character in the story (though less obviously so in Peo’s tale). I think this is in part true, but the formal mechanisms of realism versus fantasy, reason versus imagination, still hold good, and in fact the coalescence of the objective story with the distinct narrator/events relationship only goes to show how a clear perspective on the narrator is a vital prerequisite for interpretation.
In Poe's *The Fall Of The House Of Usher* we first feed that the conflict is between Usher with his "morbid acuteness of the senses" and the atmosphere that has accumulated around the house and its immediate vicinity, an atmosphere he believes is the result of the "sentience" of the physical universe around him, an environment which, in its depressingly destructive effect on his character, seems to have almost a will of its own. Initially our impression is of the poor suffering Usher subject to a sensory bombardment he hopes to resist or alleviate through music, painting, reading etc. He is fighting a battle, as he himself says, "with the grim Phantasm Fear", this fear being the result of the anticipated blows of the physical world upon his senses. This is probably the way a film director might treat it, that of a man resisting the slow emergence of horror all around him.

But there is a completely different view, prompted in part by D.H. Lawrence's opinion that *The Fall of The House of Usher* is a love story and that Usher in his search for an ideal love actually embraces those sensations which would seem to be destroying him. Of Roderick Usher actually likes the horrific things that happen to him, if he is in fact an impulsive, irrational, masochistic character who knowingly embraces his own self-destruction in his search for an ultimatley refined and ideal state of mind, then the conflict can hardly be between him and his sensations. Rather, the conflict has to be between him and us, between Usher and the same observer who finds it impossible to understand how a man might act in such an irrational way. Such a man is the narrator of the tale - our representative in this particular case; and so the more significant conflict of the story can be seen as between this utterly - if not overly - normal narrator and the highly aberrant and abnormal protagonist. The objective story gives way to the narrator/events relationship. To understand this second conflict properly we must understand the narrator but as he's never introduced to us we have little to go on other than what we might learn from his style, his sober commentary on events, and his inordinat slowness in appreciating the reality of the situation. With our eyes fixed on Usher and the narrator. It is a
subtle trick when Usher says “Madman! I tell yout that she now stands without the door!”

Poe is making the point that our sane narrator really is a madman. That us, he is made in so far as he has been incapacitated by his very fixed and rigid view of reality.

To understand what is wrong with the narrator we have to go back to the style of narration. It is a very scientific style. It is as if the narrator were utterly detached from his own person for he records physical details and his own-reactions to them with impersonal precision. In fact the complexity of his sentences reveals a fussiness over details and his own reactions to them with impersonal precision. In fact the complexity of his sentences reveals a fussiness over details and a ponderous and pedantic style worthy of a Victorian scientific society. The use of archaic or academic words such as “malady” instead of “illness”, “supposititious” instead of “imagined”, “countenance” instead of “face”, and many more, imply a concern with propriety and usage which overrides the import of the content. The narrator is like a Victorian explorer reporting on his journey to a distant land to a sane and sober audience. His concern is the demonstration of his learning and methodology and the brilliance of his discovery-an irrational man! - but not the implication of this fact. The narrator never becomes emotionally involved in the situation - the event never “reach” him - and in the end he runs away from the horror of it all. Even when he answers Usher's summons at the beginning it seems to be out of a sense of social duty rather than deep concern for an old friend. Of course, the events do finally overwhelm him at the end when he's at a complete loss to find a rational explanation of his own fear and trampling, but it's rather late in the day for him to be grasping something strange is going on. Even then the narrator has not true moral response to this situation. Throughout the story the 'caring' narrator - and by implication, the society he represents and the reader who identifies with him - are gradually revealed as morally inhuman and coldly objective.

What is wrong with the narrator is that he fails to comprehend the significance of what he so accurately describes. Despite his own knowledge and experience he still misses the point. And he is experienced. He is familiar with opium, lives in a house similar to Usher's reads the same books. He has pored for hours with Usher over his utopias,
anti-clerical satires, books on the inquisition and torture, Machiavelli’s
anti-feminist tract, occult writers, books on the relation between heaven
and earth, book an fantastic creatures like aegypans and satyrs, the
book on the vigils of the dead. He knows the abstruse material that has
gone to form Usher’s mind. He’s seen his abstract paintings, heard his
intens lute-playing. He knows of his neuroses, his suffering sensibility,
his chronic illness and yet calls him a “hypochondriac”. He’s observed
Usher’s bizarre appearance, he’s observed his contradictory behaviour,
he’s observed the fragility of the house, the fact that house and tenant
are about to crumble, and yet he still treats it all as a perplexing case for
which there might be an answer (although he often admits there is little
hope). The narrator is a great rationaliser. The idea there might be an
atmosphere around the house, a force induced by the arrangement of the
stones, he dismisses as the result of an optical illusion. The violent storm
toward the end is seen as a freak occurrence of nature and not the result
of disturbed psychic forces. His own irrational fears he puts down to the
arrangement of the furniture. He knows of the sympathies between bro-
ther and sister but never suspects Madeline may still be alive. The nar-
rator is so normal, so rational, that his normality blinds him and he fails
to perceive the truth. In fact his obsessive rationality seems to have
dulled his other faculties: he is unimaginative and has little feeling. La-
wrence saw this rationalising, this ‘knowing’, as Poe’s sin against
nature; however, in textual terms it seems to work in this book as an
ironic condemnation of the narrator rather than the writer.

The moral inadequacy of narrator is proven by the fact that when it
comes down to practical help, all he manages to do is assist Usher along
the road to his inevitable doom. He panders to Usher’s folly, beliving
every word about his “morbid acuteness of the senses”, his need to read
bizarre texts for solace, his need to protect Madeline from body-
snatchers and therefore put her in the underground vault. He accepts all
of Usher’s “rationalisations” without perceiving the insane end they are
furthering. Usher’s illness is a protective fantasy, a self-imposed and
welcome “sickness” serving as an excuse and a means for the blind
pursuit of rarefied ideal-Usher’s desire to live on some ultimate psychic
plane beyond the reaches of the body. Usher’s paighting and music and
library of books carry him toward this ideal. His psychic frisson with the
entombed Madeline carries him there too. And the narrator assists Usher in his mad design right up until his assistance becomes a bad joke - the reading of the “Mad Trist” by “Launcelot Canning”. It is at this point, as Madeline breaks out of her vault, that the narrator’s ‘assistance’ reveals itself as not protective of an endangered mind but supportive of an insane purpose. The narrator has been used by Usher: irrationality has twisted reason around its little finger.

Usher is irrational; the narrator is rational. And yet Usher seems sane to the narrator because he has his “reasons” for his odd behavioue. And the narrator seems insane to us, and also to Usher, because he rationalises blindly, unaware of the truth. Sanity and rationality are not then a matter of ‘being able to reason’; they are concerned with the way we reason; finally they are a matter of judgment about reasoning, and judgment about desired ends. Usher’s desired end is, we judge, insane, and therefore he is irrational. He suggests his desired ends are a matter of prudence and self-protection when in fact he us pursuing a wild idea-

lity - self - indulgent thrills of pleasure for his own psyche. The narrator’s ends we may judge as sane enough (helping his frined) but his rationalising and his acceptance of Usher’s rationalising we perceive as foolish. So just because the narrator rationalises this doesn’t mean his judgment is correct. SAnd neither does the fact that his judgment is wrong make him totally insane: in this sense he is not mad, he is a fool, and foolishness carries moral overtones. Sanity is not a matter of rea-

soning but of judgments about desired ends. Our assessment of sanity depends on what we think are reasonable or acceptable goals for indi-

viduals to work towards. And the narrator’s goals seem reasonable enough. What makes the narrator “mad”, however, is that because of his incredible foolishness Usher’s insanity has become his own.

The narrator never questions why Usher fails to struggle against his illness, never tries to overcome his sensory acuteness. Their activities together pander to those rarefied sensations he alone can tolerate and in fact longs for. The narrator never tries to make Usher face reality in any way, never forces him to open himself to normal everyday sensations. He never feels any moral imperative to take decisions for, or force any course of action upon, a man he knows is deranged. One way to over-
come Usher’s morbid acuteness of the senses would be to force him would be to re-introduce him into society and put an end to his isolation. To be helped, Usher must be returned to the ‘normal’ world of the narrator - forcefully, if necessary. Failure to act in any of these ways means that Usher will not only be allowed to destroy himself but that the narrator too will be drawn into the irrational spiral. Insanity will carry the sane and their pathetic attempts at assistance with it toward destruction. Far from being horror for horror’s sake, The Fall of the House of Usher offers this salutary warning.

Yet if we in the end condemn the narrator for his blind and stupid rationality, there is a sense in which our accusation is unfair. In a literal sense who could believe the events that occurred in and around Usher’s mansion were a ) really happening and b) happening for such bizarre reasons? The only way out of this seems to be to regard the narrator as being symbolic in the same way that the fantastic Usher himself is symbolic: the narrator represents a rational society’s failure to comprehend irrationality. This interpretation may be all well and good but we cannot forget that the actual mechanics of the story are founded in a literalistic sense of reality: the narrator and Roderick Usher are both human beings, and the narrator’s mistakes seem to be genuine human beings, and the narrator’s mistakes seem to be genuine human ones. But how can they be? The narrator exists on a literal level, Usher in a fantasy world. The relation between Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby is just the same. This mixture of realism (or literalism) and fantasy plays tricks on the reader’s responses and throws an ambiguity into the work of interpretation. In fact it can be quite a serious initial stumbling block because it means that relationships in “realistic romances”, just like those in fantasy, cannot be viewed in the same way as relationships in life. In realist and naturalist fiction we are used to making judgments about human behaviour and responses, and about the credibility of situations, by using our experience of real behaviour and situations as a yardstick. In fantasy literature of whatever kind (allegory, romance, gothic novel etc) we cannot use this yardstick. Instead we are dealing with ideas and interpreting on a more symbolic and general level. The trouble with a lot of American literature is that it induces us to fall into the ‘realistic interpretation’ fallacy.
Usually this happens where the basis of the story is realist - as it is in Bartleby or The Great Gatsby - but where the central character becomes more than real assumes mythic or enormously symbolic proportions. And often to assume such proportions the character must lose some of his credibility as a real person and the fact that he is still regarded as ‘normal’ by the other characters can place a strain on the literal credibility of the entire piece of fiction. Whenever this happens that piece of fiction has ‘escaped’ from the realist dimension into the realm of the fantasy novel. But nonetheless it is still quite hard to use solely the criteria of symbolism for works which seem in so many ways quite obviously realist. This problem of whether to read literally or symbolically is not only a problem for the reader of melville’s Bartleby, it’s also a problem for the narrator of the story himself. I would like, then, to continue this discussion using the twin themes of how the narrator views events and what the narrator himself - viewed symbolically - actually represents.

III

The lawyer in Melville’s Bartleby may in fact be a more significant narrator than the one in Poe’s tale, and is certainly more important than the ostensible subject of Melville’s story, Bartleby himself. Bartleby is a kind of tool that prises open the secrets of a society, as much a literary device as a real character. His act of passive resistance forces the lawyer to examine not only his conscience but the principles by which he governs his life. As in The Fall or The House of Usher this narrator once again represents the contemporary society, but this time we learn much more about it.

Having to carry the analytical intelligence of the writer - perhaps the same way as Huck Finn gas to - the lawyer becomes quite a complex figure and his responses to Bartleby double-edged and contradictory. Nowhere is this contracttorioriness brought out better than on the last on the last pase where we find the lawyer commenting that the dead Bartleby sleeps “with kings and counsellors” and “lives without dinin”. As if rationalising the “wondrous ascendency” Bartleby has over him, the
lawyer finally concedes his greater wisdom and suggests his message will live on. This is to admit that Bartleby actually has a conscious purpose and that his preferences were symbolic acts played (out on a very small stage and directed principallt at the lawyer) (though, of course, if the lawyer represents the society- ‘I know you’ ⁹ - then this may adjust our perspective). To admit that Bartleby has a conscious design behind his self-destruction raises the issue of literal credibility (if we are to regard the story as purely realistic - which we probably cannot do). Yet the credibility angle prompts another way of looking at Bartleby and one supported by the ‘Dead Letter Office’ sequel, the note on which the narrator terminates his tale, and an attitude hinted at throughout. This view sees Bartleby as “incurably forlorn” and melancholic, a person sick in his soul, utterly depressed by the failure of human communication, the failure, of man to improve the quality of his life, a person completely disenchanted by the human condition itself, a person whom no-one can help and for who suicide is the only way out. This view sees Bartleby as so depressed by man’s failure to be better, that he gives up hope and opts out of living. Because this view is wrong, the sequel must be seen as a kind of ‘red herring’ in that it suggests Bartleby was a poor unfortunate fellow, the victim of circumstances productive of his inevitable doom. Bartleby may have had these feelings but we shouldn’t view him as irrationally self-destructive. I think we must take the first reading - that Bartleby has a Conscious purpose (or’ at least, that the narrator has a conscious purpose in the use of the Barleby figure) and suspend our concern with the everyday reality or credibility of the story. What sort of characters act in this way? A Jesus Christ or a Mahatma Gandhi - but their actions are for a higher purpose others are aware of; only the lawyer is aware here. So how do we credibly accept self - sacrifice for such a small purpose? We must read the story on a more representative and less “realistic” level.

And yet this personal level has a strange effectiveness. Bartleby is the lawyer’s personal Christ, whom he betrays like Peter to the other lawyers and sells like Judas for “pieces of silver” to prison and the grumbman. Bartleby is the lawyer’s Christian conscience. “Somehow, the things I had seen disqualified me for a time from church-going”, ¹⁰ says the lawyer after discovering Bartleby’s pitful loneliness - his use of the
lawyer's chambers as a home. Seized by guilt and fraternal melancholy, the lawyer comments: "both I and Bartleby were sone of Adam". When his sympathy shifts and he calls Bartleby a millstone round his neck, the actual quotation from Matthew 18 reminds us of the Christian idealism at the back of his mind.

"But whose shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depths of the sea."  

Here is the ironic contrary emphasis. Bartleby is a believer in ideals, a man the lawyer will come to believe has been billeted upon him by Providence—before business considerations force him to forget the assumption. At one point in the story the narrator quells his anger at Bartleby by recalling the biblical injunction "that ye love one another". The line which follows this in John 15 is this one; "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Bartleby makes this sacrifice, as Christ did, but the ideal he upholds is a hard one to live with. So we can see, then, that Bartleby is the lawyer's dialogue with idealism, his confrontation with an impossible ideal about which there can be no discussion or compromise. And yet by reaching toward such impossible ideals seems to be the way man progresses. Bartleby is the lawyer's conscience: he knows it asks too much and yet it irks him all the same. Bartleby is the nagging idealism in American life.

In saying this we are coming to the conclusion that it is not just the lawyer who is the society: it is the lawyer and Bartleby. But let us take a look at the lawyer and see what he can tell us. The conflicting considerations in the lawyer's life are those of Christian idealism and business interest: while acutely conscious of the former, the latter always wins. At one point in the story he consults "Edwards on the will" and "Priestley on Necessity" and concludes that "Bartleby was billeted upon me for some mysterious purpose of an allwise Providence". No sooner has he accepted this than he abandons it:

"I believe that this wise and blessed frame of mind would have continued with me, had it not been for the unsolicited and uncharitable remarks obtruded upon me by my professional friends who visited the rooms".
We know that the lawyer is prudent and cautious: laudable qualities, but what they mean is that business comes first. Some things we learn about the lawyer indirectly. The "sudden and violent abrogation of the office of Master in Chancery" reveals he can get passionate when his personal self-interest is threatened. The uncarpeted floors and stark premises testify to his meanness, as do the meagre salaries of his employees. The wall-views from his windows symbolise the imprisonment Bartleby rejects and the copying the reduction of men to machines - a process alose suggested by the resistant eccentricities of Turkey and Nippers. The lawyer is aware of these limitations imposed on life by modern business but he accepts them by turning them into a source of amusement: the view from his window is "deficient in what landscape painters call 'life' ", Turkey and Nippers are patronised as figures of fun. When Turkey uses a ginger nut for a seal the lawyer is angry but sees the funny side. Bartleby never sees the funny side: all he sees is mechanisation, monotony, imprisonment, dehumanisation. Here again are the conflicting views: an idealism that demands too much perfection, a realism that accepts too much limitation.

It is fitting that Bartleby is billeted upon the lawyer. The narrator tells us at the start that he "seldom indulge(s) in dangerous indignation at wrongs and outrages". This means that he minds his own business and social causes and moral issues never bother him: he gets on with business. But moral problems are at least on his mind: Bartleby is on his mind. Bartleby is there to remind him that not only business matters. The lawyer and his scrivener are like a measuring stick of the moral responsibility of 19th century American society. The Christian tradition has installed a moral vein, which as business progresses, is very rarely tapped. But it is there. That it is there not as conspicuously as Melville would like is suggested by the sequel whose trite ending, "Ah Bartleby, Ah, humanity" condemns the lawyer for his insistence upon Bartleby's melancholia and depression rather than his moral rightness. Of course, he is not sure whether he should add it, but add it he does, and its sentimentality betrays the lawyer's frame of mind - and also endorses his representativeness.

It is this personal way of telling a story that reveals so much. The fact that the lawyer chooses to reveal this rumour he heard about the Dead
Letter Office shows how sentiment can over-ride authentic moral response. Elsewhere in the story the lawyer wisely concludes his sympathy has a limit because “pity is not seldom pain”. Infinite sympathy for Bartleby would lead to self-destruction because Bartleby cannot be helped. It is a prudent and self-preservatory response. But somehow it misses the point. Ideals are painful to uphold, but just because they hurt, this is no reason to reject them. What may mislead us here is too literalistic a reading of the story: in any literal sense, how can Bartleby be helped? And along with the limited sympathy and sentimentality goes the sort of moral blindness associated with an almost wilful misreading of events. This is what both Poe’s and Melville’s narrators have in common: they make - because of the paucity of their moral imaginations - the wrong rationalisations. The lawyer is convinced that Nippers suffers from indigestion rather than frustration with his work and Bartleby’s refusal to copy is because of eye-strain:

“Instantly it occurred to me, that his unexampled diligence in copying by his dim window for the first few weeks of his stay with me might have impaired his vision.

I was touched, I said something in condolence with him.”

Wrong judgments and sentimentality are part of the lawyer’s moral constitution.

Construing Bartleby as irremediably sick rather than trying to communicate a message is perhaps his basic misconception. All their conversations are conducted on two separate planes of awareness. The lawyer is pragmatic and offers lots of practical help like finding another job, touring Europe with a gentleman, defraying the expenses of a journey home to Bartleby’s family, even the temporary adoption of the scrivener by the lawyer himself. But Bartleby isn’t talking the same language; he isn’t talking personal practicalities. Bartleby is impersonal, altruistic: he is talking the language of ideals, he is talking about equality and love and justice, ‘natural’ man and the utility of life, personal freedom and happiness. We are dealing with two sides of the same coin: the Christian work-ethic and industrialisation (which can lead to dehumanisation) and a Christian idealism (which can lead to greater social justice and a better quality of life). In the context of the lawyer’s Wall Street, this idealism becomes almost the language language of revolutionary social change. The lawyer cannot speak this language and their conversations are
hopeless failures.

The lawyer also deludes himself in his reluctance to take firm action in dealing with Bartleby. This is the weak spot that Bartleby exploits. The lawyer seems to believe that all civil men will behave in a civil way and there need be no resort physical force. He seems to be terrified of losing his temper, raising his voice, resorting to physical violence or calling in the police. He seems to want to ignore the fact that people who threaten the status quo of a society are often violently suppressed. He wants to offer no violence to Bartleby yet nonetheless get rid of him. It is a little like wanting to eat meat without killing animals. (How do you get rid of your conscience painlessly?) He pretends the civil operation of society is not backed up by physical force. He ignores the violence which is the guarantor of his freedom. And he does something else too, which is a sign of the story’s historical significance: he tries to get rid of his Christian conscience. And he does this through a process of moral humiliation (when he moves his own premises the victory is Bartleby’s) and betrayal. Bartleby recognises the lawyer’s expediency and wants nothing to do with him. Yet at the end the lawyer admits Bartleby’s idealism and how it will live on - then drowns it in sentimentality about a man he sees as a manic depressive.

IV

Poe’s narrator and Bartleby’s lawyer are both “sensible” people; they exist on a realistic level and we can feel some bond between them and us. What they write about, however, doesn’t exist on the same level: Usher and Bartleby belong to the world of the imagination, they are symbolic devices, they belong to the literary world of symbolic fantasy. The narrators are Poe’s and Melville’s means of transporting us into that world, of making us suspend our disbelief. Naturally there will be some tension between these worlds but once we admit the the non-literalistic nature of these stories then the credibility factor in interpretation should be at least side-stepped, if not overcome. It’s interesting, though, that both narrators want to view their ‘subjects’ realistically, as we ourselves would in similar circumstances, and this just adds to the confusion: we
have to be aware we are dealing with a mixture of realism and fantasy. Without first person narration *The Fall Of The House Of Usher* could have been almost pure fantasy because there would have been no intruding realistic narrator. On the other hand, without the fantastic Bartleby, Melville's story could have been almost pure realism. This clash between realism and fantasy partially accounts for why the narrators go wrong in their interpretations of the central character; and why, when we accurse them of their misconceptions, we are not making altogether coherent judgments. The element of fantasy forces into prominence the representativeness of these narrators, and out judgements about them are really judgments about what they represent. The judgments we make about characters in fantasy are different to the judgments we make about realistic characters because the 'given' parameters of their worlds are different. Fantasy usually leads us to a discussion of ideas rather than a discussion of characters "as if" they were real. Our stories, however, seem to force us to operate on two critical levels at once.

The two novels I mentioned at the beginning, *Moby Dick* and *The Great Gatsby*, illustrate this same mixture of realism and fantasy. Ishmael, the realistic narrator of *Moby Dick*, scientifically analyses whales, philosophises about events and judges characters in a story that is obvious fantasy. Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* has to address his moral adjustments to a character whom Lionel Trilling called a symbol rather than a credible character, the contrasctions in him (tender romantic dreamer and brutal gangster) being too much for a realistic fictional character to sustain. In both of these books, too, the narrator is faced with making a coherent judgment about characters that don't exist in real terms. The whole thing is a fictional trick; like the dead Letter Office in Bartleby, a red hearring thrown in to mislead us. Or, perhaps, remind us - remind us that the true subject of fictional study is not fiction itself (as a Post-Structuralist might claim) but society. The fantasy element forces us to look at what characters represent and not confuse our attention to the coherence of the fictional world itself. Gatsby and Bartleby could be 'realistic' - a dissident clerk, an extravagant millionaire - but they wouldn't mean a thing. They strain fictional realism and the sense - making of the narrator, but this only reminds us it's our judgments that finally matter. Even in Poe's story can we really
expect the narrator to believe there is an intangible force or presence which surrounds the house, that clouds could actually collide with each other as result of antagonistic psychic forces, that a man could actually pursue such bizarre ends as Usher does? Poe is asking a realistic narrator to acknowledge the donnes of a fantasy would. Well, of course, he goes wrong, just like the lawyer goes wrong, and in any realistic sense this is understandable. What is more important is the representative relationship between the narrator and his subject, the alternative subjective plot of American fiction: fantasy - that fictional inventiveness which disguises a direct dialogue with society - will have the last word.

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Notes


6. Lawrence, P. 75 - 78.


11. Melville, p. 120.

12. The Bible (Mathew, 18).


14. The Bible (John, 150).

15. Melville, p. 130.


17. Melville, p. 104.


22. Melville, p. 124, 125.

Looking Literature A Comparative Study of Native Speakers’ and ESL Learners’ Responses to Literature

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Abstract

Literature, which for a long time lost its dominant position in language teaching, is beginning to play once again a vital role as its value in the learning process of ESL students gains increasing recognition through the well reasoned arguments of its proponents. Little attention, however, has been directed toward studies of the demonstrated ability of ESL learners to derive meaning from a literary text. This article attempts to contribute to filling that gap with a comparison of NS and ESL students responses to poetry. Their responses to the same poems are summarized and then compared, and based on the findings, conclusions are drawn that support the argument that ESL learners are not inhibited from gaining some understanding of a literary text by being imperfect language users, and that, on the contrary, they have much to gain from having literature combined with their language studies.

Traditionally, English programs in universities in non-English speaking countries have emulated literature programs for native speakers. This state of the discipline began to be modified as English developed its international status and drew increasing numbers of students whose goal was not necessarily to become professors of English literature. The modification in many cases, though, was to treat literature as material for grammar exercises, to the neglect of meaning. A balance between these two extremes is now, however, being established.

Two developments, in language teaching and in the study of literature, hold promise for ESL students. Firstly, ESL instructors are beginning to recognize the value of literary texts in the language learning process, not as “drill material for the acquisition of language skills” (Marckwardt 1981:5), but as material that stimulates students into discovering meaning and in the process tightens their grasp of the language and
develops their ability to use language to express meaning themselves. Secondly, a more flexible approach to literary interpretation has developed: one that recognizes multiple meanings and individual reader response rather than one definitive interpretation for a given work. This means that ESL instructors need no longer feel reluctant to teach literature even of they are not experts on the field. They can enjoy the literature along with their students and ignore “formalist criticism that is bogged down in technical terminolog and complex symbolism” \( \text{Spack 1985:720} \).

Opponents of literature in ESL teaching have argued that because of its cultural otherness and its linguistic complexity literature cannot contribute to, and even inhibits, the learning process of ESL students, since they are unable to derive meaning from it. While his argument has been clearly refuted on a theoretical level (see, for example, Arthur 1968, Marshall 1979, Povey 1967, 1979, Scott 1965, Widdowson 1975, Wilkins 1977), little empirical evidence has been given to demonstrate its fallaciousness. This paper attempts to offer such evidence with the findings of a comparative study of NS and ESL students’ responses to the same poems. The purpose of the study was to gauge the ability of ESL students to derive meaning from a poem without the help or guidance of an instructor. To this end the responses of an introductory poetry class at the United Arab Emirates University were compared with those of a group of British students, selected and documented by I.A. Richards in Practical Criticism (1929).

Richards’ study was used as a touchstone as it is a unique and comprehensive example of British students responding to poems in their native language, and the generation gap between the two groups of students was not deemed a limitation for two reasons. Firstly, in terms of determining the extent to deriving meaning from a poem because of its linguistic complexity, it was deemed irrelevant. Secondly, in terms of the extent to which cultural otherness may be a barrier, the gap was seen as being possibly advantageous under the assumption the many ESL students today hold, perhaps, values similar to those of the NS group.

Procedure

Richards’ study was based on his compilation over a number of years
of his Cambridge students' responses to certain poems. The poems were
diverse in character, and their authorship was withheld from the
students, who were asked to comment on them without inhibiton. To this
end the anonymity of the students was assured. In addition, apart from
suggesting that the poems were "a mixed lot," Richards was careful not
to influence his students opinions, lecturing on them only after receiving
the written comments, or "protocols" as Richards called them, which
then became part of a later lecture (1929:3-4).

Most of Richards' students were Honors Degree undergraduates ma-
joring in English, i.e., literature, but his audience also included a fair
number of undergraduates majoring in subject other than English and a
few graduates and nonacademic members. Richards estimated that men
and women were more or less equally represented, and that approxi-
matley 60 per cent of those given the poems responded. Since the exer-
cise was not compulsory, Richards interpreted this response as being
indicative of "a more than ordinarily keen interest in poetry" (1929:5).

The ESL students in this study were women undergraduates, and,
although the group was smaller than Richards', it was representative of
the students at the university studying English beyond the basic level of
the general requirements. Over half the students were in the College of
Arts, with a small majority of those majoring, and the rest minoring, in
English. Nearly a third were English specialist from the College of
Education, and the remainder were majoring in other colleges and mi-
noring in English. The students were mostly in the first semester of their
third year in a four year undergraduate program, their first year having
been spent of general university and college required courses and their
second on beginning their major and minor areas of specialization.

The students were divided into two groups, and each group was given
a different set of four poems selected from those used by Richards. As in
Richards' study, the poems were not discussed with the students they
were invited to comment freely and anonymously on the poems and
asked to return their written comments after a week. As a deviation
from Richards' method, each group was then given the other set of four
poems together with printed sheets of representative comments taken
from Richards' protocols. The students were asked to indicate their
response to these comments (agreement of disagreement), and they were
also given the opportunity to add further comments if they wished. Since response was, as in Richards’ study, not made compulsory, the deviation from Richards’ method described above was employed so that all students could respond to eight poems without being discouraged from participating by the prospect of what would be for them a heavy burden of writing.

The response to part one, requiring written comments, was around 96 per cent, and to part two, requiring response to the sheet of comments, around 67 per cent. While such a response can in part be explained by the close student/instructor contact in this teaching context, it was nevertheless impressive and the lower percentage of response to part two indicated that the students did indeed consider participation voluntary.

From the poems distributed by Richards (1929:366-367), the eight poems were selected for diversity and as least likely to have been previously read by the students. Finally, since the focus of the study was on the students’ ability to drive meaning from the poems, no attention was paid to language errors in their comments.

The Responses to the Poems

In consideration of length and repetitiveness, I include summaries of the responses to four of the poems, and only brief comments on the remaining four poems. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotations are specific excerpts taken directly from the written comments of both groups of students. Group A refers to the NS students and group B to the ESL students.

Poem 1


Life’s more than breath and the quick round of blood.
‘Tis a great spirit and a busy heart;
The coward and the small in soul scarce do live.
One generous feeling, one great, thought, on deed
Of good, are night, would make life longer seem
Than if each year might number a thousand days
Spent as is this by nations of mankind.
We live in deeds, not years, in thoughts, not breath, 
In feelings, not in figures on a dial. 
We should count time by heart-throbs. He most live 
Who thinks most, feels the noblest, acts the best.

Group A (Richards 1929:21-30)

The comments focused on, as Richards puts it, “the place and value of the doctrine and whether that doctrine was well or ill expressed,” and reactions varied between “high degrees of delight and disgust” (1929:21). The majority found the thought to be true but were otherwise divided. At one end of the scale, the opinion was that this true thought was “noble,” “remarkable,” “profound,” and “original,” but opinions on its expression varied from “vivid” to “confused” and “dull”. At the other end of the scale, the thought, although considered true, was also described as “commonplace”, “obvious”, or “trite,” and its expression was seen as either “convincing” or “obscure” or “tame”.

Group B

The students had no difficulty in understanding the doctrine in the poem and found the thought “noble” and “idealistic” and “powerfully expressed”. They were divided in opinion about the tone, some finding it “sad” and others “confident” and “optimistic”. Some found it to be both: “generous” but “sad,” happy” but “fearful for the future,” “excited over the idea” but “grieving” over people’s “misinterpretation of the meaning of life.” Almost all of them approved of the moralizing in the poem.

Poem 2

Spring Quiet (1847), by Christina Rossetti. In Richards 1929:32. (In the copies given to his students, Richards inadvertently missed out the word go as the third word of line 3 (1929:366). The omission was retained in my students’ copies of the poem).

Gone were but the Winter, 
Come were but the Spring 
I would to a covert 
Where the birds sing.
Where in the whitethorn
Singeth a thrush,
And a robin sings
In a holly-bush.

Full of fresh cents
Are the budding boughs
Arching high over
A cool, green house.

Full of sweet scents,
And whispering air
Which sayeth softly:
“We spread no snare:

“Here dwell in safety,
Here dwell alone,
With a clear stream
And a mossy stone.

“Here the sun shineth
Most shadily;
Here is heard an echo
Of the far sea,
Though far off it be”.

Group A (Richards 1929:33-4)

Those who were adverse to the poem thought it “silly’ and “juvenile,” and the slant rhyme was scathingly put down to the poet’s inpetitude. These respondents also tended to focus on details, being critical of what were considered to be grammatical mistakes, inaccuracies in description, or inconsistencies in logic, and thereby, according to Richards, avoiding “going into the poem” (1929:35). The “green house,” for example, was taken literally, and its coolness and color, and the ability of the sun to shine “most shadily” were ridiculed.

Thoses who reacted positively to the poem were not obsessed with
such details. They saw the Poem as sincere and spontaneous, as expressive of a "deep passion for real life as distinct from mere existence", and as conveying an "atmosphere of quietness and uninterrupted peace." Many, however, were still perplexed by the "cool green house".

Group B

The students who reacted unfavorably to the poem generally dismissed it as not having much to say, but they did not react vehemently against it.

Those who liked it, on the other hand, were very enthusiastic although they were divided in their interpretation of the green house as an actual house and as a safe place under the trees nobody quarreled with this description. Nor did anyone quarrel with the slant rhyme. In fact some described the movement of the poem as "smooth".

In general, these students saw the poem as expressing "happiness" and "delight" at the prospect of the "coming of spring," and as discerning well the "beauty of nature in springtime." Many referred to the place described as "clam" and filled with "a sense of safety." Still others saw it as "safe and beautiful," but "lonely." To one student the speaker expresses the hope of leaving "austere" winter to "embrace the spring" which is "full of life" and "safety," revealing, thereby, a need "to escape from something." To another student the tone was "happy" for the most part, "except [in] the last two stanzas [which] seem sad, "leading this reader to conclude that the poem should be read with "tenderness," and that it is a reminder "of the beauty in spring" and of the fact that just as "spring comes after winter," so too "the difficulties which may face us in our life may be resolved."

Poem 3


There was rapture of spring in the morning
When we told our love in the wood.
For you were the spring in my heart, dear lad,
And I vowed that my life was good.
But there's winter now in the evening,
And lowering clouds overhead,
There's wailing of wind in the chimney-nook
And I vow that my life lies dead.
For the sun may shine on the meadow lands.
And the dog-rose bloom in the lanes,
But I've only weeds in my garden, lad,
Wild weeds that are rank with the rains.

One solace there is for me, sweet but faint,
As it floats on the wind of the years,
A whisper that spring is the last true thing
And that triumph is bron of tears.

Group A (Richards 1929:53-61)

The responses fell, with few exceptions, into two very distinct and opposing groups, with both connecting form to content to prove their point. At one extreme were those who found the poem to be "sentimental rubbish" descending "to the limit of bathos," with "mere jingling rime," "hackneyed" metaphors, and a "true cheap-magazine tone". At the other extreme were those who found it "really first-rate," and affective expressing "strong and sincere" emotion and conveying with "such a poignancy" and with pleasing "melancholy power" a "sense of some ineffable sorrow" and the "inspiring and courageous though of the last verse." The technique was considered "very good," with "the alliterations" especially noticeable, the rhyme effective, noticeable symbolic details, and fine musical rhym-generally "excellent lyrical form" that also depicts "nature beautifully and faithfully". As one person put it, it "got me straight away."

There were a few who did not fit into these two categories. Generally they felt that the subject was serious and the emotion valuable but that the poem degenerates into "mer sentimentality" and is a failure because of the poet's "childishly and forcedly simple" treatment of the subject. One respondent described the poem as "uniformly artificial," both in its pretence of conveying a deep emotion and in its technique, which was considered inadequate to even the pretended emotion.
Group B

Generally the comments said very little. A small minority found the poem sentimental, and a few agreed with criticisms of the technique that were in the NS group’s comments that were given to them. Those who liked the poem limited themselves to describing the “sadness,” “loneliness,” and “regret” of the speaker, basically putting in their own words the emotion they felt the speaker was conveying, without further comments of their own. There was, however, some confusion over the sex of the speaker, and one student thought the “lad” to be the speaker’s son.

Poem 4

*Spring and Fall, to young child* (1880), by Geraed Manley Hopkins. In Richards 1929:80. (Richards deliberately omitted the stress mark on the word will in line 7 (1929:83), and the same omission was kept in the ESL students’ copies of the poem.)

Margaret, are you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleasing?
Ah! as the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Tho’ world of wanwood leafmeal lie;
And yet you will weep and know why.
now no matter, child, the name.
Sorrow’s springs are the same.
Nor mouth had, no, nor mind express’d
What heart heard of, ghost guess’d
It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.

Group A (Richards 1929:81-90)

As Richards points out, the comments of his respondents “divide with a pleasing neatness” (1929:18). Some of those who disliked the poem has difficulty “finding any meaning” and, according to Richards, be-
came irritated because of their "blank bewilderment and helpless inabil-
ity to comprehend either the sense or the farm of the poem" (1929:85).
Consequently, they found the poem to be "doughy, heavy, obscure,
indigestible and unsustaining." a "doughy, heavy, obscure, indigestible
and unsustaining," a "nonsensical conglomeration of words" that are
"vague and incoherent" as well as "too complicated and symbolic," and
even "trite" To one respondent it was "sentimental [sic]," to another
"the worst poem I have ever read," and in complaints about the diction,
another respondent was indignant about not finding "wanwood" or
"leafmeal" in four dictionaries.

On the positive side, praise was high, and a number of respondents
mentioned preferring it above all the other poems they were given. In
contrast to those who dismissed the poem, this group found it to be
skillfully written. For example, "wanwood," "leafmeal," etc. were re-
cognized as being a means of compression They also found it to convey
a great deal - "wistfulness without sentimentality," and "the emotions of
sorrow and forlorness [which] lose nothing in communication." A few
considered the possible readings of line 7 and their effect on meaning,
and although some mentioned needing to read the poem a number of
times, its difficulty was not considered a defect, and all felt that they
arrived at an understanding of the poem.

Group B

Those students who felt that they understood the poem could be di-
vided into two even groups. One group accounted for Margaret's grief as
arising over the loss of "someone dear," or, specifically, her child, or as
the result of having no child. To the others Margaret's grief was for the
"passing of youth," of the "beautiful period of life," and for the
"coming of old age" as reflected in the "dead leaves." Some also felt that
the speaker was giving a message to Margaret and telling her not to
"waste her time" mourning over something that is inevitable, that is "the
nature of life," because "there will be plenty of sadness when they are
old," for when. Margaret becomes old "her heart will be like the dead
leaves". However they interpreted this poem, they all felt, thought, that
the poem expressed "sadness" and a "melancholy sympathy" for Mar-
garet.
The few who had a negative response to the poem found little to say about it. Some agreed with the sheet of the NS group’s comments that the style was jerky, that the poem suffered from a lack of clarity, or that it was too complicated. Very much in a minority were those who agreed that it expressed false sentiment.

Poem 5


What’s this of death, from you who never will die?  
Think you the wrist that fashioned you in clay,  
The thumb that set the hollow just that way  
In your full throat and lidded the long eye.  
So roundly from the forehead, will let lie.  
Broken, forgotten, under foot some day  
Your unimpeachable body, and so slay  
The work he most has been remembered by?

I tell you this: whatever of dust to dust  
Goes down, whatever of ashes may return  
To its essential self in its own swason,  
Loveliness such as yours will not be lost,  
But, cast in bronze upon his very urn,  
Make known him Master, and for what good reason.

Both the NS group (Richards) 1928:63-79) and the ESL students were confused by the poem. Most were uncertain whether the speaker was addressing a statue or a woman, but the popular interpretation of the theme was that beauty will never die. Although confused about the thought in the poem, many of the NS students seemed to apporove it because of what Richards terms “the glamour of the expression” (1929:65). Only a small minority in either geoup saw the poem as hollow.
Poem 6


Between the erect and solmen trees
I will go down upon my kness;
I shall not find this day
So meet a place to pary

Haply the beauty of this place
May work in me an answering grace,
The stillness of the air
Be echoed in my prayer.

The worshipping trees arise and run
With never a swerve, towards the sun,
So may my soul's desire
Turn to its central fal fire.

With single aim they seek the light,
And scarce a twig in all their height
Breaks out until the head
In glory is outspread.

How strong each pillared trunk; the bark That covers them, how smooth; and hark,
The sweet and gentle voice
With which the leaves rejoice!

May a like strength and sweetness fill
Desire and thought and steadfast will,
When I remember these
Fair sacramental trees!

This poem elicited approval from an overwhelming majority of the
ESL students and a small majority of the NS group (Richards 1929:93-102) for the religious thrust seen in this poem. A negligible minority of the ESL students dissented from this approval and were in agreement with the NS students who thought the poem “superficial,” “prim,” “smug,” or “self-conscious.”

Poem 7


Climb, cloud, and pencil all the blue  
With your miraculous stockade;  
The earth will have her joy of you  
And limn your beauty till it fade.

Puzzle the cattle at the grass  
And paint your pleasure on their flanks;  
Shoot, as the ripe cornfield you pass,  
A shudder down those golden ranks.

On wall and window slant your hand  
And sidle up th garden stair;  
Cherish each flower in all the land  
With soft encroachments of cool air.

Lay your long fingers on the sea  
And shake your shadow at the sun,  
Darkly reminding him that he  
Relieve you when your work is done.

Rally your wizardries, and wake  
A noonday panic cold and rude,  
Till 'neath the ferns the drowsy snake  
Is conscious of his solitude.

Then as your sorcery declines
Elaborate your pomp the more,
So shall your gorgeous new designs
Crown your beneficence before.

Your silver hinges now revolve,
Your snowy citadels unfold,
And, lest their pride too soon dissolve,
Buckle them with a belt of gold.
O sprawling domes, O tottering towers,
O frail steel tissues of the sun-
What! Have ye numbered all your hours
And is your empire all fordone?

Many similar responses were prompted in both the ESL students and the NS group (Richards 1929:131-144) by the poem. They were divided over what one NS student described as the “heaps of pictures” it created. To some these were pleasant, to others, the opposite. In either case the focus was on imagery and diction. In both groups little was said about meaning, with only minority in each group finding the poem “obscure” or “incomprehensible.”

Poem 8


Solemn and gray, the immense clouds of even
Pass on their towering unperturbed way
Through the vast whiteness of the rain - swept heaven,
The moving pageants of the waning day;
Heavy with dreams, desires, prognostications,
Brooding with sullen and Titanic crets,
They surge, whose mantles’ wise imaginations
Trail where Earth’s mute and languorous body rests:
While below the hawthorns smile like milk splashed down
From Noos’s blue pitcher over mead and hill;
The arrased distance is so dim with flowers
It seems itself some coloured cloud made still;
O how the clouds this dying daylight crow
With the tremendous triumph of tall towers!

Many of the NS group (Richards 1929:155-161) and the ESL students were attracted to the poem for both its imagery and the thoughts it prompted for them. The NS dissenters tended to agree that the poem attempts to play with the reader’s emotions and is artificial. The ESL students who were not drawn to the poem, however, were equally divided between being in agreement with the dissenters in the other group and having little reaction at all to the poem.

Analysis

The table gives a rough indication of the popularity of the poems with both groups of students. The percentages for the NS students are in column A and for the ESL students in column B.

As had been anticipated, the ESL students paid little attention to issues of form and technique, for the most part addressing these only in their reactions to the comments selected from Richards’ protocols and which the were asked to consider. Unlike the NS group in their reading of Poem 2, for example, the ESL students did not appear to have been inhibited by the “exaggerated respect for rhyming ability” that, according to Richards, prevented his students from seeing that the poet had “other more difficult and more important tasks in hand,” or the slant rhyme was international—a thought, as Richards puts it, “to be bewildering to be entertained” (1929:34). Otherwise, the comments of the ESL students were revealing and at times unexpected.

Except in their responses to Poem 2, the majority of the ESL students opted for being noncommittal when they were not favorably inclined toward a poem. With a relatively simple poem, this could be because, even though they might have indicated some understanding of it, they may not have been able to explain why the poem had little appeal for them. In the case of a more difficult poem, it could, alternatively, suggest that they were able to accept that the poem may have value, even if they were unable to grasp its meaning as indicated, perhaps, by the response to Poem 4. The unfavorable response to Poem 2, the exception, may be
explained by its form. In this case, not understanding such an apparently simple poem may have prompted some corctude that the poem has little merit.

The ESL students were attracted to the sentimentality of Poem 3 in the same proportion as the NS students, but Poems 1 and 6 elicited quite different reactions. While only a small majority of the NS students liked these poems, an overwhelming majority of the ESL students responded favorably. The divergence of opinion here points to cultural differences not apparent in the comments on the other poems. The ESL students were strongly attracted to the expressed idealism and the overt moralizing of Poem 1, and to the religious tones of Poem 6. This appeal can be understood in the context of the background of the ESL gorup, and their response to these poems supports Marshall's (1979) argument that ESL students are often culturally less remote from literature in English than native speakers caught up in the angst of the twentieth century zeitgeist.

Finally, the reactions of this group to Poem 2 and 4 were quite revealing. Proportionally, more of them than of the NS group favored these poems, and their comments indicated an unexpected, even if not total, grasp of their meaning. Unlike many of the NS group, these students were not put off, as previously mentioned, by the slant rhyme of Poem 2, and in their concentration on meaning many reacted well to the mood and tone of the poem. Likewise with Poem 6, they apparently were not deterred by the difficulty of the poem, and their responses indicated an ability to derive meaning even from a poem of some sophistication and technical complexity. Like Preston's more advanced students, these ESL learners appeared to have found and recreated "within themselve the main feelings of the poems they read" (1982:489); they appeared to respond quite easily, for example, to the seasonal imagery in these poems, even though the seasonal changes of the West are outside their experience. Perhaps, by relating the harshness of the western winter to the harshness of their summer and the regenerative aspects of springtime in the West to the growth time of their fall, they were able, imaginatively, to turn the cycle of death and rebirth around and make it compatible with their own experience.
Conclusion

Although poetry may be the most complex of the literary genres for ESL students to handle, according to this study’s findings it does not appear to be quite so difficult for them as is generally thought. According to Richards, the most formidable barriers to appreciation for native speakers are their “immaturity,” “lack of reading” and “inability to construe meaning,” as well as their tendency to bring “stock responses,” or “doughtly authority” into their interpretations (1929:310-314). The ESL learners in this study did not appear to be any more impeded by these barriers than their first language counterparts, even though their reading background would not, of course, compare with that of the NS GROUP. In one respect, however, the gaps in the ESL groups’ reading may have been to their advantage in that they had no recourse to “doughty authority” when faced with the poems.

What is apparent, though, is that they are not deterred from trying to understand a poem by their limited familiarity with critical terminology or by their imperfect knowledge of the language - a finding that supports Povey’s (1967) contention that response to a text is possible without complete comprehension. This finding also bears similarity to one of Raimes’s in her study of ESL student writing. She found that ESL writers do not pay as much attention to error avoidance and correction as unskilled native writers and that consequently they concentrate more on finding ways to express their meaning. She concludes that possibly this is because they are not inhibited by the fear of using the language imperfectly that affects their native counterparts (1985:247). In the responses of these ESL readers to the poems, a comparable lack of inhibition can be seen, which suggests, similarly, that because they are learning the language, the do not feel called upon to demonstrate critical expertise. It also suggests that they are able to approach literature with relatively open minds because they do not carry the burden of twentieth century Western cynicism Freed of such expectations and this burden, they are able to concentrate instead on what McKay terms “aesthetic reading,” through which they interact with the literary text (1982:531) and, thus, are able to discover meaning.
## Table *
Relative Popularity of the Poems

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<th>Favorable</th>
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* The percentages shown in the A columns are taken from Richards’ table (1929:365).
REFERENCES


Raimes, Anne; 1985. What unskilled ESL writers fo as they write a classroom study of composing. *TESOL Quarterly* 19, 2:229-258.


