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USING LITERATURE TO TEACH LINGUISTIC PRINCIPLES

Kathleen Doty

Finding a way to make the study of language as interesting as the study of literature is not easy task. One solution, however, lies in a combination of the two, a union which allows the more difficult subject with its phonemes, morphemes, and theories of grammar to enjoy some of the delights of its more congenial relative. Using literature to teach linguistic topics such as language acquisition, doublespeak, and the complex relationship between language and society can be very successful. In particular, science fiction literature is a useful starting point, not only because many of its speculations interest young people, but also because it frequently refers to language study.

Science fiction plots often involve communication between earthlings and extraterrestrials or exploration of language as an agent of thought control (Friend 998). Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Huxley's *Brave New World* are two prime examples of literature which discusses language issues. A more recent science fiction novel, Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue* (1984), makes explicit use of linguistic principles. Because Elgin explains the linguistic concepts she uses, background study in linguistics is not required for students, and the novel can be used profitably either in a literature course which includes study of language or in a language arts unit at the high school level; I use it in a college-level introductory linguistics course. The novel gives students an example of the relevance of language to their lives and provides much useful information on topics such as language acquisition and the relationship between language, thought, and society.

As Walter Meyers (1980) points out in his study of how various science fiction writers put linguistics to use, many writers choose to ignore or gloss

over the problem of language and communication between different species. John Krueger (1968) has also studied the glibness with which many science fiction writers handle the language problem. In *Native Tongue*, however, Elgin places the topic of inter-species communication at the center of her novel by creating a setting that is both familiar and foreign to twentieth century readers. The novel is set in the United States in the twenty-third century, but it is a radically changed United States. Its technology is highly advanced, and the government carries out extensive space exploration, including communication with alien beings from across the galaxy. In addition, Elgin opens her novel with the text of the 25th Amendment to the Constitution, which eliminates all adult rights for women. Women are the property of men once again, and they are completely at the mercy of their male superiors. They are seen primarily as breeders, and the most important educational training they experience is at the "Marital Academies." In spite of women's status in this futuristic U.S.A., Elgin's novel is unabashedly feminist. It is also unabashedly based on linguistic principles; the author is a former professor of linguistics and she used many linguistic concepts in fascinating ways.

At the heart of her novel are the lines of linguists—a large network of inter-related families whose members, both male and female, are trained from birth to acquire and study languages. These linguists, or Lingoos as the public derogatorily calls them, are employed by the U.S. government to learn the languages of the alien beings with which the U.S. comes into contact. How they learn the language of the aliens is the main structural and thematic device in the novel.

In *Native Tongue* Elgin takes the modern Chomskian view that infants acquire language through exposure to language, sometimes more than one language, and that it is a unique property of the human brain that enables infants to form rules and construct a grammar out of the raw data of language which surrounds them. Elgin's premise is thus that human infants can acquire any language as long as they are repeatedly exposed to it and have someone to communicate with in that language. In her novel, the lives of the linguists are devoted to acquiring languages, including the languages of the aliens, and serving as translators for the government. She creates a special environment, called an Interface, in which human infants and humanoid alien creatures can interact and communicate. The infant children of the linguist families are systematically exposed to two alien

languages every day as well as the primary language of the household (either English, French, or Swahili), a second earth language (such as Japanese or Hopi), and a sign language. By the time the infants are fourteen months old they live a rather rigid life devoted to language learning, and by the age of five or six, infants will have native speaker fluency in all the languages they have been exposed to, often as many as six.

Clearly there must be a compelling reason for linguists to devote their lives to language, and Elgin suggests that it is more than wanting to work for the government. The linguists are the object of great hostility from the public and the government alike; their history includes anti-linguist riots in the late twentieth century. The linguist families are thus isolated and misunderstood by other humans who believe that the linguists are hungry for power and that they possess some special talents for language acquisition which they will not share with the government. However, when the linguists explain that any human infant can acquire an alien language if exposed to it, the government refuses to believe them or to allow non-linguist infants to take part in the Interface program. There are further complications in the plot regarding the acquisition of alien languages and the conflict between the linguist families, the government, and the public.

When we begin reading this novel in my introductory linguistics course, we have already completed a unit on language acquisition in which we study the stages of language development in children and the various theories about language acquisition. What the students find intriguing about Elgin's novel is how she uses these theoretical concepts, as well as actual research in language acquisition. One question that always arises is this: is it possible for a human infant to learn four or five languages between the ages of one and six, as Elgin has them do in the novel? The answer is that yes, it is theoretically possible, under the conditions Elgin sets forth. However, it is unlikely and perhaps impossible to duplicate in our world what Elgin has accomplished in a fictitious world. Nonetheless, while reading the novel students begin to reconsider their ideas about language development in children. For education majors, their changing attitudes become particularly important as we discuss the presence or absence of foreign language instruction in the elementary schools, as well as some of the issues surrounding bilingual education. The topic of the current "U.S. English" movement (sometimes called "English First") is often raised by students at this time. It, too, can be profitably examined by

comparing the attitudes toward language learning and the importance of language in the novel with the assumptions about language learning and language use held by proponents of the U.S. English movement.

The second concept that Elgin uses extensively in her novel is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, named after the two linguists associated with it, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. This hypothesis asserts that different cultures classify reality differently and that linguistic structures are ultimately responsible for these different conceptualizations of the world. As Whorf put it, "we dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language" (213). Because the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is not always immediately understandable to students, I present it as having two versions. First, the strong version, which linguists believe to be false, is that one's native language controls how one perceives reality. If this were true, a speaker of Hopi, a language which makes time-space distinctions differently from English, would not be able to conceptualize time as speakers of English do. If the strong versions were true, it would also be the case that if your native language did not have a word for table, you would not be able to conceptualize a table. The strong version also prevents translation between languages, which we know is readily possible. Thus, the strong version is unacceptable.

The weak version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, however, is impossible to prove as true or false. The weak version claims that one's native language facilitates ways of perceiving and thinking, providing habitual grooves of expression, but it does not preclude others. The classic example of the weak version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is that the Inuit (Eskimo) people have thirteen words with different meanings for what native English speakers simply call snow. The point is that Inuits perceive snow differently from English speakers and habitually make distinctions between types of snow which are expressed in their language. English speakers can surely learn to make such distinctions as well, but they don't habitually do so. The fact that many different ways of perceiving reality exist in different cultures around the world lends some support to the weak version of the hypothesis. Yet, it is impossible to prove or disprove, and there are arguments against it. For instance, though language is certainly the main means by which we transmit culture from generation to generation, much learning and conceptualizing takes place nonverbally. Arguing that one's native language determines how one perceives the world leads to determinism, an unacceptable position for most linguists.

The question of whether language determines one's reality is raised extensively in Elgin's novel. She has created a plot with a dramatic conflict that places the relationship between language, thought, and society at its center. The novel offers students what Elgin calls a "thought experiment" based on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. First, the society she has created is highly polarized, primarily between women and men, but also between the linguists and the government and between the linguists and the public. As mentioned earlier, the women are completely dominated by the men and have no rights. The women of the linguist lines, however, begin to use their extensive knowledge about language to invent a new language that they believe will enable them to express the unique perceptions of women, the reality of women. They believe that existing human languages are inadequate to express their perceptions and they need their own women's language. They call their new language Láadan.

The idea of inventing a women's language contains a built-in paradox, however: if language really is inadequate to express women's perceptions, then how is it that the only medium women have for explaining the inadequacies is that very language? This paradox provides a point for lively discussion in the classroom, as do these related questions: Do you think human languages are inadequate to express women's perceptions? If so, what is the effect on women and what can be done about it? Can you come up with an example of something you, as a woman, would like to talk about but don't have the words for in the language (s) you know? Can you, as a man, think of an example for yourself of this experience? In addition, the linguistic themes dealt with in the novel provide a context for class discussions about the related issues of slang, dialect, and private languages.

In the novel itself, the accomplishment of creating the women's language and then beginning to use it secretly among themselves (for it must be kept secret from the men of the linguist lines, or else they would destroy it) results in a change in reality. That is, once Láadan is spoken by the young girls and women, the men begin to perceive the women differently, though not more positively, and decide to send them to live in separate houses from the men. This change reduces some of the daily oppression the women experience; it is also a change in the women's reality which will enable the language to survive and grow.

What Elgin has done is to take the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the idea that language influences perception and thought, and use it to explore the

status of women in society and the role of language in both perpetuating and changing that status. Although the change in the women's reality occurs near the end of the novel, Elgin has brought in the issue of language change and social change throughout the novel. These issues have important connections to our lives in 1989. The relationship between language change and social change is complex, but Elgin is entering into the debate over whether language reflects or causes, at least in part, women's oppression. Given the fictional society she has created, Elgin has an excellent test case; ultimately, Elgin suggests that language change and social change walk hand-in-hand, reinforcing each other, and it is impossible to say that one leads the other.

When we discuss this issue in class, I ask students to think about the kinds of social changes that have occurred in the past thirty years, especially for women and minorities, and the associated changes in language. Questions we discuss include: When social changes occur, how does language change? If we change our language, does our reality change? For instance, if adult women are no longer referred to as "chicks," "babes," or "girls," is there a corresponding change in their reality? Is there a change in the perceptions of those who used to use such terms? Our discussions are usually lively, though never conclusive, and students come to see that linguistic concepts such as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, language change, and the relationship between language and thought have a connection to their lives. The study of language does not have to be dull and dry.

Elgin's novel provides many opportunities to study other language topics besides those discussed above. For example, one can examine the processes by which words enter our vocabulary by looking at the words Elgin invents and uses in the novel: blending is evident in words such as comset (for computer set), gardrobes (for closet), sidewalks (for moving sidewalks), and clingsoles (for shoes), while manipulation of English sounds and slang words are seen in threedies (used in place of three-dimensional) and effing (used as both an adjective and adverb for the almost ubiquitous F-word in present-day English). Doublespeak can be discussed in relationship to the mis-information the government gives to the public about the linguist families, their work, and their style of living. The techniques used by characters in the novel can be compared to current examples of doublespeak, such as "servicing the target" instead of "killing", "peace insurance" to refer to aid for the Contras, and "infomercials" instead of television "commercials"

(these examples are from the best source for doublespeak, *Quarterly Review of Doublespeak*, published by NCTE).

While writing her novel, Elgin discovered she needed to construct the women's language of the novel, Laádan, rather than simply imagine that it existed. She invented the language, using features of languages from many different language families, and then wrote *A First Dictionary and Grammar of Laádan*. For a detailed study of the grammar of this invented language, this introductory text can be used in conjunction with the novel. It includes vocabulary, grammar, and translation exercises, much as a text for any other language would. Elgin also talks about writing the novel and creating Laádan in an informative videotape available from The Magic Granny Line. In addition to Elgin's novel there are others that can be profitably used to study language. Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, of course, deals with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis on a grand scale. The society he creates and especially the language, Newspeak, both support the claim that whoever controls language also controls all individuals' thought and perceptions of reality. J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is also a favorite for close study of its invented language, Elvish, as well as the sophisticated techniques and historical principles on which Tolkien builds the language and the story. I have also used excerpts from another novel, *Riddley Walker* by Russell Hoban, to discuss the phonological and morphological principles we employ when reading. The opening line reads:

On my naming day when I come 12 I gone front spear and kilt a
wyld boar he parbly ben the las wyld pig on the Bundel Downs
any how there hadnt ben none for a long time before him nor I aint
looking to see none agen. (1)

It continues in this manner until the closing sentence. Hoban's novel is an excellent source for examining the differences between written and oral language, as well as language change and its relationship to social change. Also instructive are excerpts involving dialect use from various novels, including the Uncle Remus tales, Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Zora Neal Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God*, Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, Henry Roth's *Call it Sleep*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.

If students come to see the study of language as stimulating and exciting instead of dry and tedious, they will have taken an important step

in their intellectual development. Using literature to teach language issues is one way we can help students take that step. My experience with Elgin's *Native Tongue* has shown me that through literature, students grasp concepts eagerly and they begin to see how ideas about language and aspects of language that they initially thought esoteric and perhaps irrelevant do indeed connect to the world, to their lives, and to the creative work of writers.

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