

Language and Culture: A Social Semiotic Perspective

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Language as Social Semiotic

Both literary scholars and applied linguists are engaged in developing students' linguistic, literary, and cultural competence at all levels of the undergraduate curriculum. But whereas literary scholars or linguists research the subject matter—for example, the target language, literature, or culture—applied linguists investigate the process of transition that students experience as they apply their linguistic, literary, cultural resources to the study of another language and culture. I call these resources “social semiotic,” a term borrowed from the linguist M. A. K. Halliday, to refer to the way language functions both as expression of and as metaphor for social processes of meaning making. Besides everyday conversation, these social processes include the production and reception of literary texts as well as the reproduction and critical interpretation of cultural values, attitudes, and beliefs. Halliday writes:

By their everyday acts of meaning, people act out the social structure, affirming their own statuses and roles, and establishing and transmitting the shared systems of value and of knowledge. [. . .] This twofold function of the linguistic system ensures that, in the microencounters of everyday life where meanings are exchanged, language not only serves to facilitate and support other modes of social action that constitute its environment, but also actively creates an environment of its own, so making possible all the imaginative modes of meaning, from backyard gossip to narrative fiction and epic poetry. The context plays a part in determining what we say; and what we say plays a part in determining the context. As we learn how to mean, we learn to predict each from the other. (2, 3)

Applied linguists are interested in how nonnative speakers of a language strive to speak, write, and understand speakers, writers, and other sign makers who use a different social semiotic system. What environment of their own do they create? What “modes of social action” do they engage in that differ from their own, familiar, ones? How do students learn to predict text from context, and context from text? Halliday continues:

We have to proceed from the outside inwards, interpreting language by reference to its place in the social process. This is not the same thing as taking an isolated sentence and planting it out in some hothouse that we call a social context. It involves the difficult task of focusing attention simultaneously on the actual and the potential, interpreting both discourse and the linguistic system that lies behind it in terms of the infinitely complex network of meaning potential that is what we call the culture. (4–5)

It is from this social semiotic perspective of language as both meaning and meaning potential that I examine the teaching of language, literature, and culture.

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