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SAY WHAT YOU MEAN

EDWARD ASH

"Then you should say what you mean," the March Hare went on.

"I do," Alice hastily replied, "at least I mean what I say – that's the same thing, you know."

"Not the same thing a bit!" said the Hatter. "You might as well say that 'I see what I eat' is the same thing as 'I eat what I see'!"

(From Alice's Adventures in Wonderland)

In the language classroom teachers are often engaged in the business of trying to mean what they say. This is hard and quite the reverse of what is normal in real life, where we simply try to say what we mean. Even when they are lying, people must successfully say what they mean in order to deceive. We do not generate sentences in our heads and then look around for occasions to use them, that is, to attach meanings to them.

Let us explore this relationship between *form* and *meaning* with the help of an analogy. A cook would decide, or be told, what kind of a cake to make before choosing the ingredients and method of cooking. It would be an academic sort of cook who first decided upon the type of flour, spices, etc. on account of their intrinsic interest or difficulty of handling and then looked around for something to make with them.

Similarly, when we use language for some communicative purpose, meaning and function (our cake or goal) come before our choice of grammar or vocabulary. We want the clerk, for instance, to supply us with two first class tickets for Kuala Lumpur, so we say as best we can whatever we think necessary to get him to hand over the tickets. It would be decidedly odd first to conceive of a desire to use, say, the Present Continuous Tense or the preposition *with* and so come out with gratuitous descriptions such as "The man is cutting the grass" or "I am standing with my sister" to anyone prepared to listen. People expect utterances to be informative.

Now, the latter kind of activity *is* what goes on in the language lesson for so much of the time. I do not know about cookery lessons; perhaps even there they follow a structural syllabus

where all the ingredients are listed in an imaginary order of difficulty or usefulness: "Item 144: brown sugar"; at which point in the course the teacher is expected to explain the nature and possible uses of the item, after which the pupils are to go away and practise using brown sugar.

The primary aim in many language lessons in Singapore is thus to *practise* certain structures and systems (e.g. the personal pronoun system) and not to *use* language to achieve extra-linguistic goals (e.g. getting objects classified or models constructed). Sadly, when real speech acts do occur incidentally in the classroom, correctness is likely to go by the board. For example, "Teacher, go toilet can?" would probably be accepted and even reinforced with "Can" or "Cannot". No amount of drilling and blank-filling exercises is going to counter the powerful effect of real communicative exchanges. It is the forms used in such encounters which will be learnt – be they correct or incorrect.

This distinction between *practice* and *use* is most important; many teachers imagine they are getting their pupils to use language when they are merely practising it. This is obviously the case where mechanical drills are concerned, but even where the teacher and textbook make valiant attempts to place the language forms being focussed upon into relevant situations (e.g. "Tell me what you *are going to be* when you grow up" "I *am going to be* a fireman") the matter is not fundamentally different. Situations, functions, concepts, etc. (in short, meanings) are being fitted to the language; whereas the natural process is the other way round – language is mapped onto reality.

Even the employment of pictures, role-play, games, etc. (though highly desirable) does not necessarily alter the fact that language is being produced for its own sake rather than to bridge an "information gap". The focus of attention usually remains the linguistic forms – the ingredients of the cake, as it were.

The argument so far is not that structures and vocabulary should not be controlled when a second language is being taught or learnt whilst being used (e.g. English in science lessons). It is not being argued that anything goes as long as the message gets across somehow. On the contrary, the importance of insisting upon correctness when language is really being used has already been indicated; the point is rather that the forms of language should not do the controlling – not dictate what is said and meant.

There are two reasons for this position. First, a strong psycholinguistic claim is made that the forms which are used in actual acts of communication are the forms which will tend to get learnt. Even a single hearing of a word in use is often enough to fix it in the memory, ready for eventual use by the learner himself. Compare the ineffectiveness of drilling for most pupils. Secondly, there is a danger of a mismatch when unwary course writers and teachers attempt to attach meaning to the words and structures which they have already decided to teach. This is the traditional method of contextualization – laudable in intention but risky in practice, especially for non-native speakers. It seems, on the other hand, that people are not so likely to go astray when they try to say what they mean as when they look for a function for the language they want to employ.

We conclude this article with some illustrations of such infelicities; they are not invented and more convincing examples could no doubt be collected from the books and classroom observation.

- (1) While two detectives were keeping guard at the door, two others opened the parcel.
- (2) As a great many people will be visiting the country, the government will be building new hotels.
- (3) The party is going to start at 8.30, so the first guests are going to come any minute.
- (4) He's going to be tired if the train doesn't come soon.
- (5) Who's she? She's Miss Chen.
- (6) She is putting up her hand.

Examples (1) – (4) are from two very successful textbooks published in the United Kingdom. (5) and (6) are examples from Singapore coursebooks.

Although the English of these sentences is not obviously wrong, one senses a lack of authenticity. It is doubtful that such locations would be used in those contexts if the desire were not to practise the Past Continuous in (1), the Future Continuous in (2), *going to* + Verb in (3) and (4), Personal Pronouns in (5) and the Present Continuous in (6). The fact is of course that the situations have been concocted for the sake of these "language items", and perhaps the following versions would otherwise be more natural.

- (1a) While two detectives kept watch at the door, two others opened the parcel. *OR* Two detectives kept watch at the door while two others opened the parcel.
- (2a) As a great many people will be visiting the country, the government intends to build new hotels. *OR* . . . is going to build some new hotels.
- (3a) The party starts at 8.30, so the first guests will be coming any minute.
- (4a) He'll be tired if the train doesn't come soon.
- (5a) Who's that? That's Miss Chen.
- (6a) She's got her hand up.

Exchange (5) is quite inappropriate. Such a use of *she* has unfavourable connotations for native speakers of English. Miss Chen might very well take offence if she overheard herself being referred to in that way. If the course writers had had in mind the functional objective "identifying people", they would almost certainly have produced the acceptable (5a).

Sentence (6) is an interesting case of what can easily happen when a certain sentence pattern (here the Present Continuous with Phrasal Verbs) is chosen and then followed through to seemingly parallel situations. The first picture on the same page of the coursebook is of two boys putting on their shirts and is captioned "They are putting on their shirts", which is quite all right. The next sentence is "They are lining up", but the picture shows pupils already lined up – not in the process of doing so. The caption does not quite fit. The third picture is for our sentence (6); it shows a girl with her hand up, and this will not fit at all. "She is putting up her hand" does not describe a girl with her hand up. The course writers would never have uttered that upon meeting a girl with her hand up, and the system of inventing situations for pre-determined sentence patterns is probably to blame.

I once observed an experienced teacher giving her class practice with irregular verbs. She wrote (7) on the blackboard.

- (7) Did you _____ yesterday?
Yes, I _____ .

Children came out in turn and inserted the appropriate form of *go*, *buy*, *write*, etc. on the board. The class then chorused the results, and we heard inevitably:

- (8) Did you buy yesterday?
Yes, I bought yesterday.

There was progression into error from the correct "Did you go yesterday", etc. (8), however, displayed the pattern the teacher was after and she seemed to notice nothing odd.

The final illustration of infelicity was produced by a student teacher during her school experience period:

- (9) Where are Zelina and Rozita going?
They are coming from the room.

The girl was motivated to put this weird exchange on the board because the objectives of the lesson were (movement) *from* and *to*; and the perfectly normal sentence "Mother is going home from the market" in the text may have somehow confused her when she was trying to give more practice with the required forms. She was again endeavouring to mean something with the words (perhaps), instead of finding words to say what she meant.

Postscript

The article above has tried to put a finger upon a source of error, namely, that of putting form before meaning. Task-based or procedural syllabi and courses attempt to set up classroom activities where the language has to be chosen for the task in hand. The issue of linguistic control alluded to at the beginning of the second part of the article will be taken up in a subsequent issue of *Teaching & Learning*.