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An Etymological Approach to the Introductory Language Lesson

While it is necessary to conduct the initial classes of a foreign language course in the target language, the instructor must be aware at all times of the student's need of a familiar point of reference. JAKOBSON[1] has discussed the need and subsequent creation of a metalanguage during the infant's acquisition of language and the interaction of language and metalanguage that enables the child to linguistically organize his consciousness. A first language is learned by means of linguistic analysis; the student who is attempting to learn a second language must be given the opportunity to utilize a metalinguistic point of reference. The incorporation of the etymological roots of native-language cognates can serve this function in a most effective manner.[2] The student who is allowed to compare what is to be learned with that which is already known will be less apt to feel intimidated by the subject matter. This does not mean that the student should be encouraged to organize mentally the target language in accordance with English syntax. In fact, PAPALIA[3] does well to underline the need for a «compromise» with audio-lingual techniques in this instance (this, however, is more important for the Romance languages than for German, as we will see later on). What is being proposed here is a way to substitute the understanding of generative schema for memorization in the learning of vocabulary. While this etymological approach is useful as a method of leading the student into subject matter, it can also be used effectively throughout a multi-year program. This etymological approach is to be used in conjunction with the cognitive theory of language learning.[4]

Unlike other subjects that build on newly acquired knowledge, the foreign language course, particularly during the introductory lessons, demands a veritable leap into the unknown. This places the instructor in the difficult position of necessarily overcoming apprehensions and inhibitions

1 Roman JAKOBSON and M. HALLE, 1956, *Fundamentals of Language,* The Hague: Mouton and Co., pp. 55–82.

2 J. N. HOOK, in *History of the English Language* (New York: Ronald Press, 1975, pp. 3–9) discusses the use of etymologies in the instruction of English at the elementary and middle school levels.

3 Anthony PAPALIA, 1976, *Fundamentals of Language Learning and Language Instruction,* in *A Handbook for Teachers of Italian,* Anthony MOLLICA, ed., American Association of Teachers of Italian, p. 6.

4 Cf. Kenneth CHASTAIN, 1976, *Developing Second Language Skills. Theory to Practice.* Chicago: Rand McNally College Publishing Company, pp. 131ff.

in the student that do not usually impair the didactic process in other subject areas. Apprehensions arise because a new language *is* «foreign.» Inhibitions come to the fore because the learning process to which the student is required to consciously subject himself, or herself, is one that has remained latent since early childhood. It is impossible to recreate the conditions in which the native language was learned. Nonetheless, the discussion of «Language,» i.e. the use of a metalanguage, is necessary and unavoidable. The study habits of university students resemble early language acquisition in that both involve the schematization of new material and the subsequent assimilation of what has previously been learned. However, the capacity to learn through the mimesis of that which was aurally perceived has been dislearned as a result of their participation in a predominantly visive culture and educational system. In addition, the student has been told, since elementary school not to accept but to question and attempt to understand all hidden mechanisms and relations. The student does not want to be told that *va bene* is an idiomatic expression that means «okay,» but rather wants to become acquainted with the structure of the language. When the instructor explains that literally *va bene* means «it goes well,» the student will try to assimilate this knowledge within the realm of his or her own experience. Since «it goes well» is not colloquial English, the student usually reacts by labeling the Italian structure as «odd.» The instructor can, at this point, engage the student at the metalinguistical level with questions concerning the structure and significance of the colloquialism «okay.» At this point the etymology of «okay» (a derivation of «oll korrect,» which in turn comes from «all correct») can be discussed (it was a way in which detractors of President Andrew Jackson satirized his alleged illiteracy). By freeing the instruction of foreign language from the self-imposed ghetto erected by the exclusion of everything but the target language from the classroom we can attempt to attain the comprehension of something as refractory as an idiom. In this case, the use of language to discuss language (metalanguage) can make comprehensible a similarly refractory (but familiar) English construction, while the use of the English etymology can integrate something as «incongruous,» in a foreign-language classroom at least, as Amercian history. While it is not the foreign language instructor's duty to teach American history, it is important to place the student on familiar terrain. In doing this we also avoid the deference of comprehension the exclusive use of the target language entails.

The student does not want to defer comprehension. Strict adherence to rote learning, particularly during the initial class sessions, can cause confusion and frustration. Eventually, the student will be forced to understand the mechanism of the language, should s/he decide to pursue the study

of a second language. Postponement of this reality will only lead to disappointment that may provoke the abandonment of further second language study. The instructor must make available to the student the same methods of learning to which the latter is accustomed: that is, the comparison of new material to what is already known and subsequent integration of the material. Cognates serve an important function in this regard. The instructor can help the student to expand target language vocabulary, with a minimum of effort, by introducing etymologies in conjunction with the use of cognates. Not only will this provide immediate satisfaction, but from an extremely pragmatic point of view, this approach will permit the student, who typically will not be a language «major,» to expand and hone his or her comprehension and use of English.[5] It will also permit the instructor to present the subject matter as related to a «real-life» or «post-University» situation and not as fulfillment of an arcane «University Requirement.»

The etymological approach to vocabulary learning can begin with a discussion of *loquor,* the Latin word that means «to speak.»[6] *Loquor,*[7] the student should be told, gives us «loquacious» (Italian: *loquace*) and the related forms «loquacity» and «loquaciousness,» in addition to «locution» («a particular form of expression, or a peculiar phrasing»).[8] It can also combine with *solo,* the Latin etymon (and the Italian glosseme) for «alone,» to form «soliloquy» («the act of talking to oneself»). The Latin root *venter* («stomach») gives us the Italian *ventre* and, in English, combines with *loquor* to give us «ventriloquy» («the production of the voice in such a manner that the sound appears to come from a source other than the vocal chords of the speaker»: from the belly, for example). *Loquor,* combined with the prefix *e-* (or *ex-* [«out»], which is, of course, at the root of «exit»: «a way out»), forms «eloquent,» an adjective that describes someone «who speaks out well.» A circumlocution is the avoidance of a specific topic, to speak around it, as it were. The student can, by now, immediately recognize the Italian cognate *circonlocuzione;* all that is necessary is to point out the Latin root *circum* («circle») that gives us «circus»

5 In addition to the immense benefit derived from the exposure to a different culture (whose comparison with American culture will serve to clarify the student's comprehension of both), the foreign language course can serve as a surrogate to the basic English composition course which most undergraduates need. Such an approach gives the foreign language course an additional dimension that will make even the non-humanities major more receptive to the subject matter.

6 While this term is particularly appropriate in this context, it would be more beneficial, in a classroom setting, to utilize vocabulary that is being introduced by the text.

7 Several of the examples that follow are taken from Norman Lewis' excellent self-study guide *Word Power Made Easy,* New York: Pocket Books, 1949, 1978.

8 I will be using *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* for many of the definitions.

and «circle.» The new English vocabulary should be learned in conujunction with the Italian cognates *(circo* and *cerchio)* that are direct derivatives of this root. At this point the instructor can initiate a dialectic where the learning of the etymon enhances first language comprehension, which in turn enhances target language acquisition, which in turn consolidates mother-tongue capabilities.

The instructor can proceed to demonstrate the manner in which word roots combine; this is essential technique for ulterior, independent study, not only of the target language, but of English also. Beginning with *circum* the instructor may introduce such vocabulary as: «circumvent» (*circum* + *venire,* Latin and Italian «to come»), «to make a circle around»; «circumnavigate,» (from *navigare,* Latin and Italian «to navigate»); «circumspect,» (from the Latin *specere,* «to look» [and it should be pointed out that this etymon gives us the Italian «specchio,» «mirror»]); «circumscribe» (from the Latin *scribere,* «to write» [this etymon gives us the Italian «scrivere»]) and «circumstance» (*stare,* Latin and Italian: «to stand,» therefore, in English, «an accessory condition,» something that «stands around something else,» so to speak) and the Italian cognates: *circumnavigare, circospetto, circoscrivere, circostanza.* Once the more familiar vocabulary has been discussed more arcane lexicon may be introduced, «circumambulant,» for example (*ambulant,* Latin for «to walk»), which means «to walk around ritualistically.» The student knows what an ambulance (Italian: *autoambulanza)* is, and its function, but may not be aware of its linguistic relation to «ambulatory» (a «walk-in clinic,» Italin: *ambulatorio*). It should also be pointed out that in Italian an *ambulante* is a door-to-door salesman or peddler. *Volvere,* «to roll,» gives us «circumvolution,» «the act of turning around an axis,» in addition to such verbs as «to involve,» «to revolve» and «to evolve» (which utilizes the prefixes *in-* and *re-,* which the student already knows, and *ex-,* a combining form the student has just learned). In addition to the cognates *rivolvere* and *evolvere,* the Italian derives *involvere:* «to wrap.»

While words such as «magnify» and «magnificent» are easily recognizable, other direct borrowings may not already be part of the student's vocabulary: terms such as «magnificat,» «grandeur,» «grandioso,» and «grand mal.» These may be incorporated into a brief discussion of the history of English by briefly alluding to the Roman and Norman conquests of Britain,[9] that is, as a link between the familiar and the unfamiliar, serving

9 In this context, the instructor may wish to indicate that while Latin etymologies have provided us with our more erudite terminology, German has contributed more popular jargon: «stomach» as opposed to «belly,» or «to produce» as opposed to «to make» come

to make the student more receptive to the subject matter. From a very pragmatic point of view, the instructor must be aware of the direction in which s/he wishes to digress from the text, and for what amount of time.

A student of French will benefit particularly from a discussion of the history of English when it is utilized in conjunction with French vocabulary whose etymologies are common to both languages. The instructor, if s/he so chooses, could use common English lexicon to broaden his topic to consider the interrelationships between all the Romance languages and their relationship to English. «Circumambient» combines *circum* and *ambire* (from the Latin *ambiant,* «a going about,» which comes to us through the French *ambiant*), to signify «to go around.» This gives us «ambiance,» «a surrounding or pervading atmosphere» (*ambiente* is the Italian word for «environment»). «Circumflex» uses the combining form of *flectere,* «to bend.» This is why a circumflex accent «bends around» the vowel. (Not only does the Anglophone «flex» his muscles, but he will also see his «reflection» in the mirror.) Admixtures such as «rendezvous» («an appointed place of meeting») may be used in conjunction with the study of the imperative. «Liaison» («a close bond or connection» or «intercommunication, especially between parts of an armed force») comes to us through the French from the Latin *ligare* («to bind»: *lier* in Modern French [the Italian derivative is *legare*]). And while in French *liaison* can only mean «an illicit intimacy between a man and a woman,» in English this is only a secondary definition. This concept is particularly useful in those instances where vocabulary has been directly introduced into English from the target language.

This use of etymologies can be particularly relevant when the culture of the target language is being discussed. For example, a discussion of musical terms can not avoid the utilization of Italian lexicon: «allegro,» «crescendo,» «piano,» and «forte,» just to name a few. Italian and French cuisine have given Anglophones scores of terms: «sauté,» «cuisine» itself. The instructor may wish, while discussing non-American culture, to consider the manner in which the dominant economic role played by the United States in the West has manifested itself in varying degrees and forms of cultural hegemony. That is, the U.S. has been able to affect Western European tongues, to a certain extent, the way the Roman and the Norman military conquests caused English to evolve. Terms such as «jazz,» «rock and roll,» «computer» and «jogging» have been assimilated by most Western European tongues unchanged. The student should be aware of

quickly to mind. This concept can be dramatically underscored by pointing out who the ancient Vandals were and what «vandalism» came to denote.

the various French governments' opposition to the encroachment of *franglais* into their language, in an attempt to maintain a linguistic «purity» or a cultural «primacy», or the post-Fascist Italian government's traditionally passive acceptance, bordering on tacit encouragement, of the Americanization of its culture.

The instructor, through the use of etymologies, will also prepare the student to see abstract relationships where s/he is accustomed to seeing only homologies. The learning of a foreign language will then help the student to perceive reality in ways in which s/he is unaccustomed, something that will be reinforced by the discussion of non-American cultures (usually the culture of the country in which the target language is spoken). To use a very commonplace example: «scale» (English)=*scala* (Italian). The student readily understands the similar glossemes and their like connotation of progressive musical tones. From here s/he can be made to see the equivalency between the English usage of «scale» for any graduated series (for example, a ruler, a graduated cylinder, a bathroom scale) and the Italian use of *scala* to signify «stairs» (a different type of graduated series). When this concept has been made clear the instructor can proceed to point out the different manners in which Anglophones and speakers of Italian describe reality:[10] while we depict a stair*well,* the Italian representation of the same reality is that of a horn: *la tromba delle scale.*[11]

Once the student understands some of the hidden mechanisms of language, his or her ability to learn vocabulary will no longer be contingent on the immediate recognition of a cognate, but will grasp more readily the abstract relations between lexicon. The recognition of a simple preposition, *con,* («with») can be reinforced by the presentation of a related cognate «convenient»=*conveniente* and its root: *con*+*venire.* The student should understand that when something is «convenient,» all the fortuitous but necessary variables effecting its realization «come together.» Similarly, a «convention» is an occurrence where many people «come together.» *Con* and *loquor* form «colloquy»: one person speaks with another. At this point the instructor should expand on this concept by simultaneously reinforcing what has been learned and explaining new vocabulary utilizing related forms and etymologies. «Tempo» denotes «pace» or «rhythm» for the speaker of English (thus «temporary,» for example, is the glosseme that

10 Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, 1972, in *Ideologie della relatività linguistica* (in *Semiotica e ideologia,* Milano: Bompiani, pp. 117–188), argues convincingly against Whorf's contention that the different generative schema of languages determines the linguistic user's perception of reality.

11 As Hooks points out, Americans depict a dog's bark as *bow-wow* while the same occurence to the French is *gnaf-gnaf* by a Spaniard is *gnau.*

denotes a brief period of time). *Tempo* in Italian means «time.» (The student by now should be willing to accept a similarity of meaning that is not a direct equivalency).[12] Hence, «con» + «tempo» (literally, «with time») gives us «contemporary,» or «contemporaneous» (Italian: *contemporaneo*). The relationship between English vocabulary and its Italian counterpart is not always so readily apparent, but this should not obfuscate the inherent relations that nonetheless connect them. For example, *dolore* is translated from the Italian as «pain.» While the student might usually expect to learn this by memorization, the instructor should make the student aware of the cogintive relationship between «condolances» and *condoglianze, con+dolore:* «a sharing in the pain, lament, or grief, of another.»

Foreign terms and expressions already present in English idiom can also spark discussions of word roots that will solidify the student's knowledge of English and provide the foundations for second language learning. Again the use of etymologies can ignite a discussion of related mother-tongue and target language terms that will expand and consolidate comprehension. For example, *lieu,* which we use in the expression «in lieu of» («in place of»), is a direct borrowing from the French. *Lieu,* the student can be told, means «place,» therefore, while an event in English is said to «take place,» the French expression is *avoir lieu* («to have place»). This can serve to reinforce what has already been noted: the necessity of approaching reality from a different tack that second language learning entails.[13] Since someone who occupies or holds a certain place in a hierarchy or a certain rank can be said, in French, to *tenir lieu,* he is called, in both French and English, a «lieutenant.» «Milieu» is a direct borrowing from the French. Here *lieu* combines with *midi* or *demi* («half») to form a noun that means «in the midst of,» or better, «surroundings,» «ambiance.» A place or a location that is not private property is, of course, common to all, the Boston Common is an example of a public park. *Un lieu commun* is a «commonplace» expression, that is, a term that has been used in so many contexts as to have become banal, a platitude. The interrelationships never end: *platitude* is a French cognate.

The use of etymologies will serve to clarify aspects of the second language for the student that the instructor may not immediately recognize as difficult. *Louer* is translated into English as both «to rent» and «to praise

12 If «tempo» were to coincide in the lesson plan with a discussion of Italian culture, the temporal power of the Papacy in Italy and its historical repercussions could be considered.

13 The instructor may note, with tongue in cheek, that while the French «visit» and «pass time» with their friends, Americans are more venial; they «spend time with» and «pay visits to» their friends.

or flatter.» The Latin *locus* («place»), and more specifically its verb form *locare,* came into French in the Twelfth Century as *loer.* The Latin word that means «to praise» *(laudare)* entered French in the Tenth Century as *lauer,* but is recorded as *loer* in the Twelfth, hence the modern-day homonym.[14]

An analysis of the historical development of syntax, in conjunction with the use of etymologies, can serve well in the explanation of the basic syntactical differences between English and the target language. For example, the «weak» and «strong» adjectival forms of German have been lost to Modern English; however, this common trait is enough to distinguish these two modern tongues from the Romance Languages. While the declensions of Latin have survived in the Romance languages to a degree that permits syntactical components to «float» within the sentence (this is particularly true of the Italian, which does not require an explicit subject), this is not the case with English and German. Because of the minor degree of complexity of these two tongues, the internal order of the sentence is extremely prescriptive: subject, verb, predicate. Modern English retains to a great degree the word order of Old English, which is identical to that of Modern German. Once the student is aware of this, s/he is no longer reluctant to question «why» the differences exist, but more apt to grasp the implicit «how» that is the final aim of most Repetition Drills.

Contrary to efforts to maintain all classroom work in the target language, the student will attempt to ground the target language in English.[15] By underlining the similarities between English and the target language, the instructor will be able to overcome the natural reticence to accept grammatical, idiomatic or syntactical differences between English and the target language when they occur. The student will realize that the target language is not the hostile monolith previously imagined and will be willing to wrestle, when necessary, with the dissimilarities. In addition, by including explanations of English vocabulary and grammar the instructor can welcome into the class those students who are among the participants because a foreign language is a degree requirement and/or are deficient in English language skills. This can be accomplished during the initial sessions by reminding the student of the need for communication skills, regardless of what path his or her life is to follow after commencement and by the

14 J. Picoche, 1971, *Noveau Dictionaire Étymologique du Français,* Paris: Hachette-Tchou.

15 Interesting in this regard, although extrapolated from its intended context, is the Italian philologist Sebastiano Timpanaro's discussion of Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* and the concepts of banalization, mental economy and the transposition of phonetically similar terms. Cf. Timpanaro, *The Freudian Slip. Psychoanalysis and textual Criticism,* trans. by Kate Soper, London: NLB, 1976.

concrete demonstration of the usefulness of a foreign language in the everyday use of the English language.[16]

The study of a foreign language is an essential part of a humanistic education and may help form a basis for understanding between peoples in an age that is in dire need of both. The instructor should keep this in mind at all times, striving to break down artificial bureaucratic barriers between disciplines. This will make second language study more attractive to students in the short term. In the long term it will displace extremely counterproductive didactic methods based on «immediate gratification.» It will also eradicate the coercive aspect of the «University requirement,» making the foreign language course a subject that a motivated non-language major will choose to study.

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16 For the etymologies, cf. William Walter SKEAT, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language,* Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1935.