

Lexical Semantics as a Tool for Developing Critical Reading in the Language Classroom

Semántica léxica como herramienta para desarrollar lectura crítica en el salón de clase

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Abstract

This paper illustrates how a detailed analysis of lexical choices can evince the author's ideological message in seemingly expository texts. The activity described, part of the content-based course English V: Technology, Environment, and Progress in the International Relations Program at the Universidad del Norte, leads students to the realization of their tendency to accept every written text as an objective depiction of reality without questioning the writer's purpose or intentions. Furthermore, the comparison of two texts dealing with the same topic but written from opposing points of view helps the students understand how language can be manipulated for particular purposes.

Key Words: lexical analysis; collocation; lexical semantics; reading strategies.

Resumen

Este ensayo ilustra la manera en que un análisis detallado de las selecciones léxicas puede manifestar el mensaje ideológico del autor en textos aparentemente explicativos. La actividad expuesta, componente del curso basado en contenidos Inglés V: Tecnología, Ambiente y Progreso del Programa de Relaciones Internacionales de la Universidad del Norte, lleva a los estudiantes a una comprensión de su tendencia a aceptar todo texto escrito como una representación objetiva de la realidad sin cuestionar el propósito o las intenciones de quien lo escribió. Además, la comparación de dos textos que tratan el mismo tema pero que se han escrito tomando puntos de vista opuestos ayuda al estudiante a entender cómo la lengua se puede manipular con propósitos particulares.

Palabras Claves: análisis léxico; colocaciones; semántica léxica; estrategias de lectura.

INTRODUCTION

In addition to difficulties such as the coverage deficiency and the lack of physical and technological resources, one of the main problems of education in Colombia is the inadequate development of critical thinking in both teachers and students alike. During the last five years of my teaching practice, I have observed that there is a general trend to accept any printed text as true. In a study carried out at the Universidad del Norte, one of the top five higher education institutions in Colombia, Barletta and May (2002) report how only 14% of the students in the project showed some level of critical reading skills, while a mere 2% was able to establish relationships between texts.

Although present in every document describing the current educational policies, in practice, the development of critical reading skills seems to be far from replacing the widely questioned “banking education system” exposed by Freire in the 1970s. In other words, Colombians learn that books, and with the current technology, the Internet, are carriers of the truth. Furthermore, the information reported in the media is perceived as an objective reflection of reality.

This inability to tell fact from opinion, to evaluate the validity of the author’s arguments, to identify missing information, and to question the writer’s intention, among others, may be overcome with the practice of Critical Discourse Analysis. This discipline considers language as more than merely one of the many possible manifestations of culture. In fact, it is considered a strongly influential factor in the definition of behavior patterns (Halliday, 1978:23). This view of language is largely based on Sapir and Whorf’s studies on Native-American languages (1964). From their perspective, the set of lexical and grammatical items found in dictionaries is only a minimal component of the complex system language is. Instead, it is “a self-contained, creative symbolic organization, which not only refers to experience largely acquired without its help but actually defines experience for us...” (Sapir, 1964: 128). Therefore, the verbalization of our perceptions of reality cannot possibly be as objective and accurate as a photograph: some items are left out, others are given a greater relevance, positive or negative features are intensified, and so forth. A more suitable comparison would be painting, where the techniques used and the color shades in our palette are largely determined by the particular socio-cultural variations of our language. Thus, the possible interpretations of a single event will differ from each other as much as the individuals who produced them.

Therefore, in the educational process, it is of utmost importance “to equip readers for demystificatory readings of ideology-laden text” (Fowler, 1996:6). In other words, teachers need to raise awareness about the fact that when reading, we are only viewing the world through the writer’s eyes, and this vision may vary greatly.

With this in mind, the staff at the language department at the Universidad del Norte set the general goals for the English curriculum of the International Relations program. Thus, the aim of the English courses is not only to learn the language, but also to learn through the language, and about the language as a meaning-making resource in a particular social context. Beyond its role as a means of communication, language is considered an extremely effective tool for manipulation and dominance, but also for empowerment and emancipation.

In this content-based program, the fifth level, called English, Technology, Environment, and Progress, seeks to evince the relationship between ideology and language through instruction in basic concepts of systemic functional grammar. The purpose of this paper is then to describe how the detailed analysis of the lexical choices of two texts with opposing points of view on the same subject can be used to raise awareness about how texts are biased representations of reality, rather than objective depictions of the world around us.

THE TEXTS

The texts in question describe the controversial issue of whale hunting in the Faroe Islands, located in the North Atlantic between Scotland and Iceland. They were taken from the Internet, since it provides direct access to uncensored and unedited material, produced without the participation of intermediaries. The selected sources are the web sites of The High North Alliance, a commercial fishing organization, and the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society, a

group concerned with the preservation of the environment. These appear in full in the appendices, and can also be found at the Internet addresses listed in the references. In order to facilitate the analysis, the first text, will be referred to as “fishermen,” and the second “environmentalists.” While the first one considers the *grindadráp*, or whale hunting, as an irreplaceable source of food and a part of their cultural heritage worth preserving, the second depicts it as a cruel, unnecessary blood sport and a crime against nature.

The striking difference between the wordings of these definitions serves as a useful example to illustrate how word choice serves an ideological purpose. In addition, this issue is not very well-known in our Colombian context, which facilitates the analysis, since students are not prejudiced against any of the groups.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

At the beginning of the session, students are shown pictures of whales and asked to brainstorm words during their observation. The purpose is not only to activate background knowledge, but also to discover their working schemata on this concept in order to compare it to the author’s. Students’ most common preconceived ideas about whales include that of a playful, entertaining animal, as seen in theme parks, and of an endangered species. A discussion on the use of whales as an acceptable source of food follows. Students generally agree that in certain climatic and geographical conditions, as in the Faroese case, a community has the right to use the resources available for its survival. Additionally, students are asked to reflect on how language might reflect the concept of whale as food. Comparing it to their experience with beef, they usually conclude Faroese vocabulary should include lexical items to refer to meat from different parts of the animal (e.g. sirloin, ribs), collocations to describe its quality (e.g. juicy, tender), and methods of preparation (stewed, grilled). Thus, students start to become aware of how language both reflects and shapes the way we see the world.

READING

Students read the “fishermen” text. They are asked to divide the text into sections, and assign subtitles accordingly. The result, with few variables is usually the following:

- Life in the Faroe Islands.
- Organization of whale hunting.
- Statistics.
- Killing procedures.

Students classify the text as expository, with the exception of the final paragraph. Invariably, the majority of the students (over 90%) express their agreement with the Faroese right to survive on whale meat, given their vital need and sustainable practice. The rare exceptions are students who have previously seen documentaries on the topic.

Students are now presented with the “environmentalists” text and shown pictures of the *grind* taken from the eco-friendly website, which usually generate strong reactions of shock, disgust, horror, and a radical change of opinion. Once their jaws are back in place, students are asked to determine whether the headings assigned in the previous activity match the content of the second article. The question is then how two articles describing the same reality, and dealing with the same topic can convey extremely opposing views, but most importantly, how they can manipulate the same information without the reader’s noticing. The answer lies in the lexical choices of the authors.

LEXICAL COHESION

A commonly neglected skill in the teaching of reading is the identification of cohesive ties in texts. Although we are all familiar with concepts such as synonymy and antonymy, they are often used solely with the purpose of learning decontextualized vocabulary lists, when they could be exploited as a valuable tool to develop reading comprehension.

Cohesion, or the “glue” that holds a text together, is created through semantic connections between words. These were classified by Halliday and Hasan (1976) as reiteration and collocation. The first includes either the actual repetition of the vocabulary item or the link with another word through lexical relations, which comprise the above mentioned concepts of synonymy and antonymy, plus the not nearly as popular but equally easy to comprehend terms of hyponymy and meronymy. However, it is important to distinguish between these “general” relations and those which are context-dependent, or instantial (Hasan, 1984:201). These concepts are introduced to students through the traditional method of direct explanation by the teacher using and eliciting examples from the texts in question.

SYNONYMY AND EQUIVALENCE

As defined by Cruise (1986:88), synonymy is “the lexical relation that parallels identity in the membership of two classes.” That is to say, two words or expressions are synonyms if they have the same or nearly the same meaning. An example from the “environmentalists” text is the pair brutal and cruel, terms which describe the killing.

In the same text, we can also find expressions whose similarity in meaning is limited to that particular context. For instance, in the extract the excitement of the crowd turns the kill into a carnival, the underlined terms are equivalent in meaning. However, when asked for a synonym of kill, no speaker would produce the term carnival. This semantic bond not only illustrates the instantial relation of equivalence, but also indicates the strong disagreement of the environmentalists with the *grind*, since it is culturally unacceptable to associate death with celebration.

Students are then asked to identify similar pairs that reinforce this concept. Examples of these are:

- *The Faroese admit that some kills have stretched on for 11 hours. Eleven hours of hell for these social, family-oriented animals.*
- *The amazing thing about these kills is that the whole affair is an “entertaining” event.*

Antonymy and Opposition

“Antonymy reflects or determines what appears to be a general human tendency to categorize experience in term of dichotomous contrast” (Lyons, 1977:277). Black and white, good and evil, the magnitude of the influence of this linguistic phenomenon on the formation of ideology is undeniable since the values assigned to objects and processes are usually stated in opposed pairs: guilty or innocent, old or new, true or false.

In these texts, the pairs of antonyms found are used to assign values to the same entities: the lifestyle in the Faroese Islands, their economic resources and the killing of the whales. Both texts use the contrast “modern” vs. “traditional” to describe the lifestyle in the Faroese. But while the environment text considers these features mutually exclusive, the fishermen text claims

the harmonic coexistence of both qualities. They also reinforce the need to use this resource by contrasting the barren Faroese soil with the abundant sea, as seen in the following excerpt:

In the poor Faroese soil, it is a feat to get anything more than potatoes and rhubarb to grow well, and there are no natural forests. And the climate is harsh; seldom a day goes by when the forecast is not wet and windy. Truly, the wealth of the Faroe Islands is in the sea.

The environmentalist text, on the other hand, emphasizes the suffering of the animals against the leisureliness of the islanders through the instantial relation of opposition:

Eleven hours of hell for these social, family-oriented animals. The amazing thing about these kills is that the whole affair is an “entertaining” event for the Islanders and their families.

Students usually point out how this contrast reinforces the idea of the islanders as blood-thirsty killers while the whales are seen as helpless, innocent victims.

Hyponymy and Inclusion

Hyponymy is considered the relation corresponding to the inclusion of one class in another (Cruise, 1986:88). It can also be conceived as the relation between general and specific terms. For instance, “silk” is a kind of “fabric.” Thus, “fabric” is the superordinate of “silk” and “silk” and “linen” are co-hyponyms. This relationship is often expressed with markers such as: Xs and other kinds of Ys. In this case, the example passes the test of normality without a problem: silk and other kinds of fabric. However, what sounds “normal” for a cultural group may sound quite strange for another. Let us consider the following cases:

- *Elephants and other means of transportation*
- *Grasshoppers and other delicacies*
- *Trees and other dwellings*

These examples illustrate how culture influences the organization of the lexicon.

Likewise, in the “fishermen” text, we can find elements that are classified according to criteria which are different from those of the general public. In fact, some of them may only be valid in that particular context, which illustrate the instantial relation of inclusion. An example of this is the depiction of the *grindadráp* as part of the Faroese heritage through the comparison with other highly valued places or events, as seen in the following excerpt.

- *Watching a grindadráp in the Faroes is rather like seeing the Great Wall in China or the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace.*

In addition to its cultural value, whaling is categorized as one of the various male activities that make part of their role as main providers of food for the family:

- *Ólavur Sjørðaberg lives in Leirvík, a village of 800 people in the Faroe Islands, where he teaches at the local primary school. But he is also a sheep farmer, a fisherman and a whaler.*

Thus, the whale is classified as source of food in the same way western cultures consider cows or chickens. The following example shows that the Faroese diet is mainly meat-based, which makes the whale a vital staple.

- *Locally produced lamb, fish and whale meat are preferred after drying them in the wind, a traditional method of preserving foods.*

As opposed to the fishermen text, the animal rights activists consider the pilot whale as a member of an endangered species that must be protected. The classification is exhaustive and

uses highly technical vocabulary (e.g. *globicephala*). Although this definition matches the students' schemata of the animal, the fishermen's text classification constituted a very effective persuasive mechanism, since, after the first reading, they identified with the Islanders' need to survive.

Meronymy

Although similar to hyponymy in the hierarchical structure of organization, meronymy establishes a part-whole relation between lexical items. This relationship can be illustrated by "body": "head," "trunk" and "limbs." In this case "head" is labeled as the holonym and "head," "trunk" and "limbs" as meronyms.

In order to illustrate the ideological implications of focusing on some parts of the whole, students are reminded of the beauty pageants which take place every year. They indicate that the most frequently mentioned parts of the body of the contestants are usually their breasts and their buttocks. They conclude that, despite the organizers' claims about the importance of intelligence or internal beauty, women in these contests are seen as sexual objects.

On the other hand, it is necessary to differentiate between the part-whole relationship in the previous example, and that indicated by collective nouns. It is obvious that the link between "body" and "head" is not of the same kind of the one between "army" and "soldier." Rather than "whole," the word army indicates "group" or "set" (Lyons, 1977:317). Thus, both texts establish a relationship between the whales as a whole and the parts of their bodies, although the environment text is slightly more detailed in this aspect emphasizing the condition of the whale as a source of food through the reiteration of the items meat and blubber.

- *At least once a fortnight he and his family eat pilot whale meat for dinner. They also eat the blubber together with dried fish.*
- *In the slatted shed next to his house, lamb, fish and whale meat hang drying in the wind.*

But the main difference is the reference to the whales as members of a collective, the pods, with a particular role in the environmentalist text (e.g. lead animal, mother, etc), as seen in the excerpts below:

...the long-finned (*Globicephala melas*) which lives in colder waters—including those around the UK and Faroe Islands—and the short-finned (*Globicephala macrorhynchus*) which prefers tropical waters. Mixed sex pods could raise the problem of inbreeding but genetic studies have recently revealed that males are rarely related to calves in their pods. In the crowded chaos, no one is spared even mothers and their babies are killed.

Students point out that this taxonomy leads them to feel that killing a whale is equivalent to murdering a human being.

Collocation

Collocation, as defined by Halliday and Hasan (1976:287) is "the cohesion that results from the co-occurrence of lexical items that are in some way or other typically associated with one another, because they tend to occur in similar environments." A word may occur in a certain environment for grammatical or idiomatical reasons. That is the case of word combinations such as "go" and "to" or "take" and "place." But word association may also obey to social and cultural factors. Thus, the study of collocational patterns can reveal linguistic habits of a certain community that reflect its set of social values. For example, frequent association of the words "sex" and "violence" shows that the society assigns "sex" a negative value and considers it a

reprehensible activity. Therefore, the analysis of contrasting collocational patterns can evince the ideology of the authors of two different texts dealing with the same topic.

Students are asked to analyze the collocational patterns of three words: whales, kill as a verb and kill as a noun. Although with some words in common, the collocates of “whale” in the environment text include a wide range of words that describe suffering and violence against the sea creatures, as opposed to the laconic description of the fishermen text:

- *The bay eventually turns into a blood-soaked killing ground of half-dead whales and horribly-mutilated dead whales.*
- *The Faroese have been catching pilot whales since the 10th century.*

The most striking difference in this respect is the number of adjectives in the green text, which triples those in the fishermen text.

The contrast between the collocation patterns of the word “killing” is similar to that mentioned above. While the fishermen text merely describes it as “efficient,” the environmentalists collocate it with a number of adjectives with a largely negative value (e.g. brutal, opportunistic).

- *This makes killing in the pilot whale hunt as efficient as in any other form of hunting in Europe today.*
- *In 1989, the International Whaling Commission (IWC), which regulates whaling, officially stated that the kill was inhumane.*

The pattern is maintained with respect to the word “kill” as a verb. In the environment text, some of the collocates of this word carry a negative evaluation of the process (e.g. blood-sport, carnival). This effect is reinforced by including “babies” and “mothers” as objects of the kill. The fishermen text, on the other hand, uses possessive adjectives before “whale” and “animal.” This sense of possession may indicate their belief of having the right to dispose of their lives.

- *The hunt has become little more than a cruel bloodsport.*
- *Ólavur was about 17 years old when he killed his first pilot whale.*

LEXICAL SETS

Students are finally asked to write the main idea of both texts as simply as possible. The result is the sentence “Faroese kill whales.” Afterwards they are divided into groups to scan the texts for words that replace the lexical items in the sentence. Figure 1 illustrates the completed task:

	Faroese	Kill	Whales
Fisherman	Olavur, Mother-in-law, Community, Family, neighbours, willing hands, The Faroese, sheep-farmer, Fisherman, people, whaler, islanders, carpenters, bank clerks, bus-drivers, public servants, members, employers, young men, elders, relatives, fathers, You, I.	Hunt, catch, whaling, slaughter, produce, drive, take	Living creature, animal, Pilot whales, Food, meat
Environmentalists	Islanders, The Faroese, families, children, fathers, friends, modern Scandinavian society	Slaughter, hunt, herd, drive, Hammer, slash, round up, Hack, strike, drag, over-hunting, mutilate, decapitate	The body of the whale, social, family-oriented animals, carcasses, pilot whales, populations, the long-finned (<i>Globicephala melas</i>), short-finned (<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>), mothers and their babies, large schools, pods, males, females, social species, extended families, toothed cetaceans, calves, lead animal, family members, older male or female, pod members, whole families.

Figure 1

The results of the analysis of the texts allow the students to see how the ideology of each group (the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society and the High North Alliance) is made evident through their lexical choices. Although both texts share the same lexical sets, the relationships established between the items indicate the ideological positions of each group. Figure 1 clearly shows the special emphasis given by the environmentalists to the representation of the whales, while the fishermen focused their attention on the islanders. This fact clearly matches the writers' purpose, which is to elicit the reader's sympathy for their particular cause. To achieve this goal, each writer tries to make the readers feel identified with the groups s/he is defending (the whales or the Faroese).

Thus, the environmentalists portray the whales as highly evolved members of a species. Hyponymy links are established between them and other members of the species such as dolphins and porpoises. They also recur to specialized lexis of natural sciences to denominate these creatures. The use of this terminology may create the effect of raising awareness about the importance of this life form. But probably the most effective strategy is the description of the whales as social animals, parts of a community, and members of a family. It is easier to accept the killing of an animal as an isolated entity than to picture it as a lactating mother or a baby. By

placing the whales within a family, emotional bonds are activated in the readers' mind. This way it is sought to generate a negative reaction to the killing of the whales.

The strategy of the fishermen is exactly the opposite. In this text, whales are equated with sheep and fish. Since it is morally accepted to use these animals as a source of food, then by extension, slaughtering whales should not be a concern. They try to reinforce this point by claiming possession of their waters as their only natural resource. Thus, whale meat gains the category of a staple food on the same level of potatoes. Hence, the process of obtaining whale meat is comparable to growing vegetables or collecting seabird eggs.

The environmentalists present quite a different picture. They indicate that, for obtaining food, the Faroese can rely on their "well-stocked supermarkets," just like any modern community. Therefore, whaling stops being a necessity and instead becomes a "cruel blood-sport." In addition to reinforcing the banality of the activity by using synonymous expressions such as carnival and pastime, the conservationists provide a detailed description of the whale drive process, the killing implements and the wounds inflicted on the whales.

The account of this process is perhaps the section where the lexical differences between the texts are most notorious. While the environment text uses the word "opportunistic," the fishermen describe the killing as "unexpected." For the green group, the whale drives are "inhumane," "brutal" and "barbaric," the islanders praise them as "efficient." Furthermore, the lexis used by the environmentalists has more to do with torture (e.g. half decapitated, mutilated) than with hunting for food. The terminology used by the fishermen tends to be more neutral and less graphic (e.g. whaling, catching).

In the same way the environment text focuses on the whales as social animals, the fishermen text emphasizes the role of the community. As opposed to the bloodthirsty image depicted by the conservationist, the Faroese people are portrayed as a normal community. They describe a society made up of families that need to be provided for in adverse conditions. For them, whalers are not sadists, but normal people like teachers, bus drivers or bank clerks that are obliged by the circumstances to carry out the task of hunting whales. They reinforce this image by narrating the life of a particular member of the community using his proper name (Olavur). The environment text, instead, uses general words to describe a rich and modern society part of "the global-exchange system" that would permit them to live comfortably without depending on whale meat.

This analysis shows how the ideology of these groups is reflected through their lexical choices. In spite of dealing with the same topics and sharing a great deal of the lexical items, each text creates a different effect in the reader. This is achieved through the lexical relations established between the words. For example, in these texts the item "whales" is classified differently. While, for the environmentalists, it is a member of a species, for the fishermen it is a source of food. Thus, different patterns of lexical and instantial relations affect the interpretation of the words. The use of evaluative language in collocational patterns is also a determining factor in the manifestation of the ideology of the groups. The association with the word "barbaric" creates a totally different effect than that generated by the word "efficient." These differences show how lexical choices are made in order to achieve a particular purpose.

CONCLUSION

Raising awareness about the link between ideology and language is a crucial, but often neglected task of the language teacher. This paper aimed at illustrating one of the type of analysis that can

be carried out in a language classroom using fairly easy to grasp linguistic concepts. The choice of texts with fairly obvious bias reflected in their lexical choices facilitates students' comprehension of both the new concepts introduced and the relationship between language and culture.

The reflections after the activity lead the students to wonder who to believe then, since, as Bolinger (1980: 182) states, "Conscious and unconscious deception is all around us, an unavoidable ingredient of every utterance warmed by a human voice." Rather than giving them an answer, I redirect the question at them. They usually conclude that the most important is to face texts with a critical mind, to consider the text as only one of the possible views on the subject, and to wonder about the purposes of the author. It is expected that, with further practice, students are able to apply these concepts along with others such as transitivity or validity, to the critical analysis of texts outside the classroom. Further research will be needed to evaluate the development of these critical skills after several courses working on CDA concepts.

Blind acceptance of knowledge prevents both the scientific and technological development of a country and the transition to a real democracy, where its citizens are able to discern and make decisions resulting from the thorough analysis of their choices, which would significantly contribute to the construction of a fairer society. This paper's aim is to share the implementation of initial steps in that direction.

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