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Some basic tenets of the audiovisual approach to language instruction are challenged in this article which considers the ways in which "meaning" is given to sound sequences. It is argued here that (1) the meaning of a sound sequence does not derive solely or primarily from visual stimuli, (2) that different parts of speech derive meaning in different ways, and (3) that much meaning is derived from linguistic context--by means of repetition, definition, and association within the language itself. Also stressed are the indications that in the learning of the mother tongue, meaning is acquired after there is familiarity and automatic control over basic linguistic structures. The article concludes that visual aids are most effective not as initial conveyers of meaning but as the stimuli for verbal associations after the student has mastered structures in the target language. (AR)

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The Visual Element and the Problem of Meaning in Language Learning

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Audio-visual and audio-lingual techniques should not imply two distinct approaches to language teaching, but there do exist differences in emphasis which are fundamental and concern the problem of meaning. Audio-visual courses lay the stress on the visual element to impart and establish meaning: pictures are used to convey realities which are immediately comprehensible, then sound-sequences are presented with them and attached to them. Audio-lingual courses make more use of equivalent utterances in the student's mother tongue, and give more emphasis to overt contrasting of those structures which differ in the two languages. Also there is a difference of organisation in the material to be taught: audio-visual courses group sound-sequences around a situation or event as it occurs in the real world, so that the context is dictated by sequences of utterances related to a particular experience: audio-lingual courses, however, take the linguistic structure as the focal point and grade material in accordance with the dictates of language itself, not too concerned with its experiential content.

The presentation of meaning

To a great extent audio-visual and audio-lingual courses do employ common techniques and can even combine to form two phases of a single basic process: work in the audio-visual room is followed by reinforcement drills in the language laboratory. It should not be thought that audio-visual courses necessarily exclude use of the mother tongue to establish meaning, for some of their chief exponents even suggest that the film-strip may first be discussed in the student's mother tongue.[1] This certainly helps to avoid misinterpretation and minimise any ambiguity, dangers which any picture can throw in the student's path. The meaning then is established first, and only after this has been done do we present the appropriate foreign sound-sequences in conjunction with the picture. Word for word translation is, of course, dismissed in favour of a general comprehension of whole sentence-units. Nor should it be thought that audio-lingual courses exclude the picture element. Courses like those of Holt, Rinehart, have picture-cards to accompany them, though it may well be argued that here the picture has not so much the initial function of imparting meaning as of consolidating and reinforcing it.

The varied functions of the picture

The picture may have many and different functions, all of which can serve a useful purpose: it attracts and holds the student's attention; as a representation of real objects, events, and situations, it sets speech in its proper context by providing an anchor for sound-sequences; it aids memorisation and can help recall by triggering off an associated response; it can provide a starting-point for oral composition and even be used to practise substitution and transformation drills based on linguistic principles.[2] These varied roles of the picture may function and acquire their value by being introduced at the most appropriate phase or stage of the learning process. One of the chief values of the picture might well be, for example, its use at a stage when students have already become acquainted with the basic structures and wish to consolidate them and use them in response to questions put by the teacher. The picture then serves to elicit answers, or questions, from the student, and reinforces the meaningful context in which the already learned structures function.

How do pictures establish meaning?

Whatever valuable functions are performed by the picture in the practice and use of basic

structures, its chief role in the audio-visual global and structural method of approach is in the initial stage to establish meaning by association of a sound-sequence with the visual representation of a real situation in the world of things. In this type of approach the use of the picture is justified, for the most part, by arguments and criteria appertaining to "comprehension" and the imparting of "meaning", and it is with this particular aspect that I am here concerned. The important question which deserves close examination is: How far does a picture impart meaning to a given sound-sequence? The whole art of teaching a second language depends ultimately on what we think are the fundamental ways in which "meaning" is given to a sound-sequence. This problem of meaning is still in need of a great deal more psychological research, for the theoretical bases upon which we build our classroom and laboratory techniques are not quite as stable as we might imagine. The concepts of "meaning" and "comprehension" need further clarification if they are not to be used as mere empty jargon signifying some kind of mysterious magical entities. An adherence either to strict behaviourist or to "gestalt" principles does not completely solve the problem.

It is I believe exactly when we seek to justify the use of the picture with arguments appertaining to the establishing of "meaning" and "comprehension" that a false notion of what "meaning" is creeps into our thinking. The question to which we need a more complete answer is: In what ways do sound-sequences acquire specific meanings and at what point can it be said that we understand a foreign word or phrase? It should be evident, in the first place, that there exist varied degrees of understanding, depending mainly on the wealth and variety of mental associations developed through experience. The complexity of the problem does not allow us to accept dogmatic statements which, like those of Guberina, exalt the picture as the messenger of meaning: "The simplest way of linking sound with meaning, is by using a picture"[3].

Levels of understanding and the notion of meaning

It is not my purpose here to point out the already obvious limitations of the picture: the danger of ambiguity, and the fact that there can be several different verbal reactions to a single situation or picture.[4] Experiments of showing pictures to young children and to adults and accompanying them with an appropriate sound-sequence in the foreign language reveal how great is the range of possible "meanings" and the variety of linguistic structures that can be attributed to any single picture, however well defined this may be. Let us for the moment focus our attention on what able exponents like Guberina put forward as the first function of the picture: "It enables the understanding of a conventional language symbol" and "The problem of understanding is solved by means of pictures". Such assertions beg too many questions and certainly there is no solid scientific foundation for them. When it is stated, for example, that a picture links sound with meaning, what exactly is meant by "meaning"? Surely what is in fact actually taking place in the audio-visual global and structural method is that the sound-sequence is being linked with a picture. Why bring in a third entity as though it were something lying beyond the picture making itself apparent through the picture? A careful examination reveals that the entity referred to as "meaning" could well be the mental formulation of a verbal structure in the student's mother tongue. If also understanding is a question of degree it might be as well to have as much precision as possible rather than a general and vague notion of the events and situations before our eyes.

Linguistic meaning and oral context

What we identify as the "meaning" of a sound-sequence is not to be defined solely in terms of visual stimuli as something which results from the association of sound with picture. The definition, however, might be adequate in respect of concrete objects like chairs and tables, and for such phenomena as colours, but as soon as grammatically determined words and abstract concepts enter the matter there is more to it than meets the eye. Meaning is acquired also by definition and association within the language itself, and meaning is something which grows from constant use and juxtaposition of linguistic structures. How the learner acquires

a workable knowledge of basic structures in the first place is the real question for the practitioner. Can these basic structures gather meaning after they have been learned? This is a possibility not too much in the mind of fervent exponents of audio-visual theory.

Guberina supports a learning sequence which gives first the meaning, then the word. This order, he says, "corresponds, in fact, to the actual functioning of language". Close observation of how a baby learns his mother tongue shows that this is not so: rather the opposite is the case. Guberina has in mind the stage at which a child begins to use actively the sound-sequences of speech, but for the first year or even two years of its life the baby hears day after day hundreds of words in permissible groupings. Only after he has heard a particular grouping again and again does he begin to see its relevance and to attach meaning to it. Linguistics lends support to the order which puts the sound-sequence first and the meaning after, though there is no conclusive evidence that this results in more effective learning. If automatic control over structures is acquired in the laboratory before meaning is brought in, then the problem we shall have to deal with will be that concerning student motivation and interest.[5]

Too great an emphasis on establishing meaning by picture alone, together with the fact that this is executed in the initial stage of the learning process, presents a false notion of what meaning is, for it does not take due cognisance of the acquisition of meaning through practising and using the structures as elements in a linguistic context. Only by manipulating sound-sequences into a vast number of combinations does the student come to understand what relationships are permissible and relevant to a particular situation: this process of gathering meaning takes place after a certain amount of automatic, instinctive control over a basic minimum number of structures has been gained.

The limitations of the picture

The notion that a picture in and of itself imparts "meaning" and helps the student to learn a language more effectively is shown to be a misconception if we study a particular case in which a young child learns a new word in his mother tongue. Supposing I have occasion to use the word "Mexican" and the young child asks "What's a Mexican?" As an answer I could show him a picture of a Mexican dressed in national costume: "That's a Mexican". He now presumably knows the meaning of the new word; at least an association is formed between sound and picture. The principal concern of the language teacher, with the limited amount of time at his disposal in the classroom situation, however, is to see to it that the student hears, repeats, and uses phrases in as many varied contexts as possible. Showing the child a picture of a Mexican does not explain the matter fully: the picture is only valuable if further speech-patterns ensue, if, in fact, it elicits further questions and serves as a stimulus for dialogue.

How words gather meaning

When looking at the picture the child cannot abstract from it as much specific "meaning" as the adult can. His degree of understanding depends on the essential features he notices and the degree to which these features help him to distinguish "a Mexican" from any other sunburnt man wearing a large hat, etc. It is also highly probable that while examining the picture some sort of verbal mechanisms are imperceptibly at work in brain and body, and the teacher's task is to help the child to give explicit verbal formulations to describe what he perceives and to convey what he feels. A fuller comprehension of an object or situation in linguistic terms can only be acquired by putting more questions and demanding more adequate answers:

Q. What's a Mexican?
A. This is a Mexican, a man from Mexico.
Q. What's Mexico?
A. A country across the sea where it is very hot.
Q. Are Mexicans nice?
A. Most of them, yes.
Q. Have you seen any Mexicans?

The new word is incorporated into structures already known to the child, and a whole set of

associations must be established if a new word or structure is going to function as an active element in the student's vocabulary. Even a single object like a chair only has "meaning" in so far as it serves a particular purpose in relation to other objects and to people: something to sit on. A sound-sequence which makes up a meaningful unit can be triggered off not only by a picture or an event in the real world but also by another sound-sequence associated with it through frequent juxtaposition. This point concerning linguistic context is often overlooked.

One picture for one structure?

The picture, therefore, is not in itself the most essential component in the business of imparting meaning to sound-sequences, and to make each single picture a stimulus which evokes one particular response is to limit severely its real value and is not in accordance with the manner in which the mother tongue is learnt. The picture merely provides a frame of reference for a number of linguistic structures and serves our purpose best if it is used to elicit question and answer interchange. A picture can be the primary stimulus not for a single automatic response but for a whole series of responses which consolidate and give a more precise meaning to a central structure.

Meaning is not to be identified as representation

Linguistics makes a distinction between grammatically determined words, whose "meaning" is not easily conveyed by pictorial representation, and content words, which are easily associated with a particular image. This leads us to consider whether a single basic method of conveying "meaning" should be employed when teaching basic structures. The relevant question here is whether what we classify as the different "parts of speech" all acquire their "meaning" in the same fundamental way. Concepts relating to space and time, for example, often require a more symbolic representation than concrete objects require. The use of the past and the future tenses need contrast and comparison in order that their full significance be understood in a visual context. In practice the value of the picture to establish meaning depends on the exact nature of the components which go to make up the particular sound-sequence being taught.

Linguistics will no doubt provide us with further information on the functioning of semantemes and lexemes, but it is to semantics and psycho-linguistics that we must look for enlightenment on the problem of meaning. The manner in which we perceive sound-sequences, however, will provide us with scientific data which will be of use to the language teacher only if it is related to the theoretical issues of how we comprehend a sound-sequence and abstract "meaning" from it.

NOTES

1. See the CREDIF instructions to *"Bonjour Line"*: *"Déroulement de la Leçon"*.
2. The "linguistic" use of visual aids is discussed in *Teaching French*: *An Introduction to Applied Linguistics,* by Robert L. Politzer (Ginn and Co., 1960), pp. 30-32.
3. P. Guberina, *The Audio-Visual Global and Structural Method* in *Advances in the Teaching of Modern Languages* (ed. by B. Libbish, Pergamon Press, 1964). This and the subsequent quotations are from pp. 4-5.
4. See G. Richardson, *The Visual Element in Audio-Visual Aids* in *Modern Languages,* vol. XLVII, No. 2, June 1966, pp. 76-79.
5. See *Teaching French* (as above), p.19, and also Brian Dutton's view in *Audio-Visual Language Journal*, vol. III, No. 1, Spring 1965, p. 37.