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# Sommario

## EDITORIALE

2

### Siamo Europei o no?

di Gianfranco Porcelli

## CONVEGNO DI PARMA

4

### Introduzione

di Lorenza Gastaldo

5

### La letteratura anglosassone nel "planeta adolescenti"

di Giulia Ragno

14

### Intervista a Sanguineti

la Sezione di Parma

## CONVEGNO DI MONTEGROTTO

16

### Analysing Poetry or Painting Pictures with Words?

di John Wade

## LA DIMENSIONE EUROPEA

20

### Primi approcci al Portfolio Europeo delle Lingue:

Un progetto tra autonomia e autovalutazione  
di Sabine C. Stricker

26

### Lingueuropa 2002/2003:

quando il team teaching funziona

di Anna Carino

## LE BUONE PRATICHE

28

### "Helping Learners to Learn Vocabulary"

di Paula Hickey

32

### Il Cercatappa

Una strategia a misura dei nostri alunni

di Maria Chiara Donatini, Anna Maria Fattori, Nives Winkler

40

### Gli ipertesti nell'apprendimento linguistico:

una proposta per la realizzazione di un ipertesto  
di argomento letterario

di Annalisa Latela

## IL LINGUAGGIO E LA MENTE

48

Lingue straniere e handicap: alcune riflessioni  
sulla metodologia di insegnamento agli alunni  
diversamente abili.

di Laura Cutullé

54

Lingue straniere nella scuola d'infanzia: conoscere  
la neurologia del bambino per operare  
consapevolmente

di Michele Daloiso

## VITA DELL'ANILS

60

"In sì aperta e 'n sì distesa lingua"

61

Rapporto sulla riunione della Commission  
dell'Europe dell'Ouest della Fédération  
Internationale des Professeurs de Français

di Anna Maria Crimi

62

Rapporto sulla Giornata di Formazione Des Façons  
Multiples d'enseigner en classe de français

di Amelia Caselli



## Analysing Poetry or Painting Pictures with Words?

John Wade

Università degli Studi di Cagliari

The aim of this talk was to examine some characteristics of poetic language with a special focus on the use of lexis, structure, and figurative language. An attempt was made to illustrate these elements from a non-technical point of view, in such a way as to provide concrete ideas which could be applied in the classroom with students who may be older teenagers or young adults.

A number of questions are raised when we begin to analyse poetic forms. Central to this paper are two questions in particular. Firstly, the extent to which poetry is really different from other expressive forms and, secondly, how this can be important for improving a learner's overall knowledge of the target language, in this case English.

Poetry is generally considered to be an unusual, creative and/or non-standard form of language use. A dictionary definition may refer to a "patterned arrangement of language", the expression of "thought, imagination or feeling" and the desire "to stir the imagination and emotions" (from *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*). These three elements we may summarise as follows. There is:

- a deviation from standard norms of language use;
- a highly focussed message;
- an emotive content.

Nevertheless, poetry constitutes part of the language system which is comprehensible, to a greater or

lesser extent, to the target language user. In this sense the 'deviation' mentioned above may be accentuated, but it is not inaccessible to the addressee, otherwise the communicative intent of the

addresser would fail. Furthermore, a 'highly focussed message' complies very closely with the communicative system underlying the Gricean "co-operative principle" (Grundy 2000: 74-75), i.e. an addresser wants to

communicate something and will do so within the bounds of reasonable comprehensibility dictated by the communicative context. Finally, 'emotive content' is a strong element of all human existence. We all understand 'anger', 'pain', 'love' or 'boredom', for instance, but our individual interpretation of them will probably vary according to our own life experience, i.e. the connotative value of 'love', to take a theme common to much poetry, may be both positive or negative. Hence the reaction to given linguistic output or the intended message becomes highly personal and open to interpretation. It is thus argued here that poetic forms may be successfully used as a springboard towards stimulating the learners own creativity in language use during the learning process, while at the same time raising his or her awareness towards some of the peculiar characteristics which make English the language it is.

In using more poetic forms of language the producer of that language has an aim, that of communicating a message and influencing the reader or addressee in some way. I have taken that influ-

ence as being an attempt to create an image in the mind of the reader, and thus the idea of 'painting pictures with

words'. We will now focus on three specific areas of language use which may contribute to creating images in the mind of the addressee:

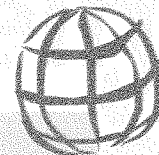
- Making lexical choices
- Making syntactic choices
- Using figurative language

Each point will be discussed briefly and examples of classroom activities will also be suggested.

### • Making lexical choices

In delivering a message a speaker or addresser makes lexical choices which have a specific semantic value. This goes far beyond the somewhat banal choices we often make when teaching the target language. While the verb 'walk' is frequently presented, the native speaker may in fact make recourse to extremely rich lexical resources in order to describe with extreme precision how a person may 'walk', e.g.

### AWARENESS TOWARDS THE CHARACTERISTICS WHICH MAKE ENGLISH THE LANGUAGE IT IS



'step', 'stride', 'pace', 'strut', 'lurch', 'trudge', and many more. Such an idea of movement may be further extended by using more unusual forms which can express not only a physical activity, but also the emotions experienced as the activity takes place:

I floated down the street.

This could represent a sensation of happiness or euphoria, or perhaps the addresser 'has his head in the clouds', i.e. is day-dreaming. It might be interesting to ask a class of students what would make them 'float' down the street and see how many different answers are suggested. We may take this further with a celebrated line from William Wordsworth's *Daffodils*:

I wandered lonely as a cloud.

The sense of space and meditation is manifest, expressed through the interaction of the lexical content of the phrase. The addresser is lost in thought, floating, like a cloud moving high in an empty blue sky. This image is created through an adroit manipulation of lexical choices.

Note that we also use these strategies in making lexical choices with the intention of being humorous, e.g. with word games which play on similar sounds, as in this newspaper headline from *The Daily Mail* (Maule 1996: 16):

Love at first slice

Here, the substitution of 'sight' with 'slice' provides an appropriate title for an article about cake recipes. Of course, our choices may not always be successful, very often giving rise to hilarious results in, for example, football com-

mentaries, as in the following sample (Fantoni 1982: no page reference):

Bolton are on the crest of a slump

There is a very fine line to be drawn between the successful choice of unusual word combinations and those which do not work. In the above example, the collocation of 'crest', the upper part of a wave, therefore 'at the top' with 'slump' or 'at the bottom' is inconceivable to our imagination or incompatible with our view of the world around us. By substituting 'on' and 'crest' with more appropriate lexical items in order to reinforce the idea of 'down', the problem may be solved:

Bolton are *in* the *pit/depths/abyss/bowels* of a slump.

Naturally, the choice is yours. This choice will be made not only on the basis of denotative meaning, and here all of the words suggested would be appropriate, but also on the connotations the lexical items may have in the mind of the specific speaker, appropriateness to the context at the time of speaking and the aesthetic effect of the sound within the phrase or sentence.

Turning to more practical teaching applications, some of these aspects of language use could be exploited in the classroom with simple gap-filling exercises. The first example is illustrated here with Leslie Coulson's poem *War*:

Where war has left its (1) ..... of whitened bone, (*trace/legacy/wake*)  
Soft stems of (2) ..... grass shall wave again, (*sum-*

*mer/autumn/winter*)

And all the (3) ..... that war has ever strewn (*pain/blood/guts*)  
Is but a passing (4) ..... (*mark/stain/blot*)

Students are required to fill the gaps with the most appropriate of the three words suggested at the end of each line. Their choices must be based on meaning, collocation or association within the context and the aesthetic effect of the sound. Thus, we find the 'white wake of a ship' associated with 'a trail of white bones'. Furthermore, we must also add the aesthetic effect of the alliteration running through the first line:

Where war has left its wake of whitened bone

As a follow up activity, each student in the class could be asked to find a photograph representing war, from a newspaper or magazine, and use the image to write a simple four line poem like the one illustrated above.

The second example makes use of a song in order to illustrate how different lexical choices can be made. With younger students songs can be a powerful source of motivation in opening the learner's mind to more poetic forms of language. This activity is illustrated with the first verse of *Every Breath You Take* by The Police (©1998 A&M Records Inc.):

Every breath you (1) ..... (*break/take*)  
Every move you (2) ..... (*make/fake*)  
Every bond you (3) ..... (*ache/break*)  
Every step you (4) ..... (*stake/make*)



Students are required to choose the correct word for each gap while listening to the song. Their choices are once again based on meaning and in this case common collocations, e.g. 'take a breath'. In addition, it raises the learner's awareness towards sounds and spelling in the rhyme system of the song, as in 'take' and 'break'. This approach can be adapted for specific work on homophones, like 'son' and 'sun', focussing on sounds and meaning, and homonyms, like 'shed' as in 'shed a tear' and 'a wooden shed at the bottom of the garden', focussing on meaning in context. As a follow up activity, students could write a verse of their own for the song.

## Making syntactic choices

Various forms of syntactic deviation are common both in poetry and prose. In its most simple form, it usually comprises some manipulation of the standard syntactic form of the sentence. For the purposes of this paper, two variants have been chosen. Firstly, the inversion of the standard word order illustrated in the following example is taken from Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*:

In came a fiddler, and tuned like fifty stomach aches.

We should, however, bear in mind that such constructions may also be found in everyday uses of language. Compare the literary example above with the phrase "In you go!". The speaker could possibly be a teacher encouraging a reluctant child to go into the classroom, avoiding a more aggressive "Go in!", using the imperative form.

Secondly, we may also raise suspense by making use of cataphoric reference which carries forward in

the text. This is far less common than forms of anaphoric reference which trace back in the text to an already identified person or other element, by substituting a name with a pronoun, for instance. An example of cataphoric reference is found in this hypothetical BBC commentator's description of a famous wedding ceremony (adapted from Wales 1989: 59):

And here she comes. Gliding down the aisle like an angel. La-dy Diana.

The addressee is constrained to ask the question "Who is 'she'?". Furthermore, not only do we find an unusual syntactic structure, but this is combined with specific lexical choice in the use of the verb 'glide', for example, instead of the more generic 'walk'. Thus we find that syntactic choice and lexical choice go hand in hand in creating the message for the addressee.

Work on the structural organisation of the message within a discourse unit, can be developed in the classroom by using songs, as in the example provided below. This is the first verse and refrain of the song *Labelled with Love* by the band Squeeze (© 1992 A&M Records Inc.):

She unscrews the top of her new whisky bottle / and shuffles about in her candle-lit hovel / like some kind of witch with blue fingers in mittens / she smells like the cat / and her neighbours she sickens / the black and white TV has long seen a picture / the cross on the wall is a permanent fixture / the postman delivers the final reminders / she sells off her silver / and poodles in china / drinks to remember I me and myself /

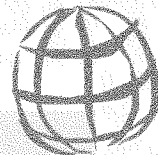
and winds up the clock / and knocks dust from the shelf / home is a love that I miss very much / so the past has been bottled and labelled with love

Students are required first to divide the unpunctuated song text into lines (possible solutions are provided here with '/'). They will discover that each line corresponds to a logical unit or 'chunk' of information which goes towards building the narrative. They then listen to the first verse and refrain of the song to confirm their answers. Attention can be drawn to the inversion in:

And her neighbours she sickens

and we also notice the frequency of the article 'the', the pronoun 'she' and the conjunction 'and' at the beginning of each line, accentuating, perhaps, the monotonous nature of the woman's existence, and how this contrasts with the consequential 'so' in the last line of the refrain.

The cataphoric reference of the initial 'she' in the first line, slowly builds to a picture of the subject through the narrative of the text and raises the question in the mind of the listener "Who is 'she'?". This activity can be further exploited by asking students to hypothesise who the woman in the story is. As a follow up activity, students can find a picture in a magazine and write her story as a narrative. To conclude, students can then listen to the complete song and compare their stories with the original, in which the woman marries an American pilot during the second world war, moves to the USA, the husband dies, she returns to England to find all her family has moved away and lives the rest of her life in poverty and solitude.



### Using figurative language

Figurative language provides a further layer of meaning within the text. Such meaning is often conveyed through comparison of some kind. We have seen in the examples used above Wordsworth's 'cloud' associated with loneliness, 'Lady Diana' compared to an 'angel', Dickens' inept 'fiddler' being compared to 'fifty stomach aches' and the woman in the last song 'like some kind of witch'. As mentioned above, the theme of 'love' is commonly taken up in poetry. The dictionary definition of love is decidedly cold and scientific: a very strong feeling of affection towards someone (from *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*). Compare this with an original interpretation provided by Jerome K. Jerome in *The Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow*:

Love is like the measles; we all have to go through it.

or Shakespeare's opening of the *XVIII Sonnet*, in which the beauty represented by a 'summer's day' provides a source of love or admiration:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

In this way the addresser succeeds in creating the simultaneous expression of an abstract concept along with the feelings associated with it and this runs through the whole text in an underlying metaphorical construct. Indeed, it has been argued that metaphor underlies the creation of meaning in all communication. See, in particular, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) for a discussion of the all-pervasive nature of metaphor in language use.

Students can be encouraged to ex-

plore this aspect of language use by inventing examples of their own, as in these suggestions, some more serious than others, made by a group of my students:

Love is ...  
an enormous chocolate cake  
a burning fire  
a rose  
the music of Mozart  
a sunny spring day  
a cold shower  
pain and suffering  
a castle  
a red Ferrari

A second example could be the description of an unpleasant character, where students are asked to list those characteristics associated with 'unpleasantness' in a person. Their ideas are then compared with the following description of Ebenezer Scrooge, again from Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*:

Hard and sharp as flint which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shrivelled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue, and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. A frosty rime was in his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog-days; and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas.

This short passage is rich in both metaphorical reference and lexical range. The unpleasantness of the character is underlined by the references to 'hardness', 'isolation' and 'coldness'. In this way the im-

age created becomes more vivid. That is to say, a picture is painted in the mind of the reader. As a final activity, why not ask your students to draw or paint a picture of Scrooge?

### Conclusion

In such limited space, it is only possible to provide a few ideas which may serve as a source of reflection for strategies in teaching more 'poetic' forms of language to our students. All of the above activities have been used in the classroom by the present writer with varying degrees of success. What perhaps is most important to note, however, is that students begin to question the choices they make in using the target language themselves. In short, they start to become more aware of the real communicative value of language, and how language itself, to use the words of Jerome Bruner (1983), "creates and constitutes knowledge or 'reality'". Indeed, we could say that language contributes towards 'painting a picture of reality'?

## AWARENESS OF THE REAL COMMUNICATIVE VALUE OF LANGUAGE

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