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Looking back:
The didactics of semantization in historical perspective

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0. Introduction

0.1. The history of science and language learning

In most branches of science there is a keen awareness of the many contributions that have built up, through the centuries, the total spectrum of the present knowledge and upon which further research continues to build. Especially in physics, in biology, in chemistry, in medicine, do we witness this historical perspective in the many names tied to scientific definitions, which point back to discoverers of decades and even centuries ago.

Not so in language learning: the names of past researchers in this field and the work they have done are unknown to practically all in the profession. One could even say that quite often present-day researchers present their work (usually a new methodology) as the first serious answer to successful language learning. No reference to previous similar answers is mentioned, no reflection on past experience with those answers is made.

We feel it important to look back, not only to give credit to those who have preceded us, but especially to learn from them, whether from their achievements or from their mistakes.

0.2. The question: the transfer of meaning in FL-education

The central questions of this presentation have to do with the transfer of meaning in foreign-language teaching: In what ways can a teacher make students understand what a new word or structure means in the foreign language? What are some of the problems connected to this understanding? What kind of strategies does a student use to grasp and to retain these meanings? We will approach this problem of semantization in didactic terms, namely in immediate relation to efficient classroom-instruction. And we will do this in historical perspective: the many ways in which teachers and researchers have experienced with the question of semantization are rich and revealing.
0.3. Methodology and didactics

I would like to stress the difference between methodology and didactics. Foreign-language teaching is mostly controlled by so-called methods, namely a number of precise instructions to transfer subject-matter. Very often a particular method is born in specific circumstances where it works successfully. It is then being commercialized, usually through a textbook to be applied by teachers who have not been involved in the growth and the specificity of the method. This situation leads to a number of tensions between a methodology and the teachers or between teachers themselves using different methods.

The study of these tensions is revealing. It helps us to understand the interaction and the problems between teacher-trainers, student-teachers, and teacher-mentors. A method can become an immutable anchor for some, and, by the same token, a target for critique for others. Very often a methodology helps to escape complex questioning, because dogma's are easier to handle.

Methodology implies a unilateral, normative approach to education. Didactics, on the other hand, is interested in the many possible teaching and learning processes that could make a specific situation more effective. In many cases didactics will gnaw at methodologies, not to reject them, but to question their validity in giving circumstances.

What we will discuss, therefore, is not the methodology of semantization, namely what is right or wrong as a dogma, but the variety of approaches.

1. From antiquity to the 19th century

1.1. Antiquity and Middle Ages

As far as we can tell from the sources available, the basis for the transfer of meaning in foreign language learning has always been translation. However, care was taken to avoid the word for word equalizations: dialogues and prose texts were taught in global sentences, showing a healthy balance: the naturalness of complete utterances was saved, while semantization was realized as efficiently as possible.

The use of illustrations to convey meaning remained limited, although there are some attempts to use the pictorial ornaments in manuscripts for didactic purposes, as for example in bestiaries.

Another way to transfer meaning is by using the target language itself, mostly by giving definitions of new words in the target language. In the Middle Ages this became a widely used procedure, especially to explain hairsplitting differences in Latin, as part of theological and scholastic training.
1.2. The Renaissance and the 17th century

The Renaissance, although considered a turbulent time of renewal, did not do much to revolutionize foreign language learning. The obvious and traditional techniques of centuries past were used; namely a fundamentally bilingual approach, using translation as the foremost means to convey meaning; the importance of the global sentence to ensure naturalness and fluency; a slow systematization of the pictorial support, providing charts and detailed drawings to name objects within a semantic field; and a continued use of definitions in the target language. After the first global language learning, wordlists would expand the subject-matter for direct use in the target language.

One could summarize the approach as follows:

- Phase I = practical dialogues
  - global bilingual first encounter
  - eventual pictorial support
  - followed by synthetic > analytic integration

- Phase II = wordlists (glossaries and lexicons)
  - analytic > synthetic integration
  - global monolingual application

1.3. Comenius: more bilingual than iconic

We should of course draw the attention to the foremost representative of foreign language learning of the period, namely Comenius, who has discussed in some detail the problem of semantization in his Didacta Magna (1650). Most people know Comenius from his Orbis sensualium pictus, a broad pictorial presentation of all aspects of life, which makes some believe that Comenius stressed pictures as the ideal way to transfer meaning. This is not so: in his Didacta Magna, he presents the use of translation as the best way for semantization, coupled, however, with the synthetic approach to full sentences. He also pleads for the use of grammar and dictionary on a contrastive basis with the mother tongue.

1.4. 18th and 19th centuries

The 18th and 19th centuries see the development towards more and more theoretical language instruction, whereby the study and translation of texts becomes an end in itself. Pictures to transfer meaning tend to disappear from textbooks. Dictionaries have become the most important tool, often less as an aid than as a method in their own right.

However, one should note that also a much more lively tradition of direct language learning continues to flourish, namely through the use of private foreign tutors in the higher social classes. Semantization, in such cases, made much more use of gestures, mime, pictures and contextual learning, instead of translation.
2. The Reform-movements: 1880-1900

The first in-depth research and experimentation with semantization happened in the last twenty years of the 19th century, known as the Reform-movement, putting all the elements in place which we still discuss today.

The battle of the Reform-movement is basically one between two extremes:

grammatical theorization <--- practical proficiency

But because grammatical theorization grew out of approaches which were fundamentally bilingual, the strategy of semantization through translation is pushed into the grammatical camp and the opposite strategy is added to the Reform-movement, namely the elimination of the mother-tongue, leading to the following polarization:

grammatical theorization <--- practical proficiency
bilingual semantization <--- elimination of mother tongue
direct semantization

This is the way the Reform-movement is often represented, as if all Reformers defended this strategy as a main characteristic of their approach. However, when studying the articles and books of these linguists and learning psychologists, it becomes clear that their viewpoints were not so simplistic and categorical.

Semantization was indeed one of the areas that stirred up a lot of study and controversy, leading to various approaches and many helpful insights. To name just a few of these:

- the function of direct procedures to transfer meaning:
  - objects and pictures: relation studies between word and concept
  - situational and intuitive identification: ways and degrees
  - activity integration; the power of mime

- nominal versus verbal basis semantization
- subjective versus objective language use for semantization
- presentation versus integration phases
- complete versus partial translation

The war over these aspects was thus more internal than against the past. Most Reformers advocated clearly that the use of the mother tongue was a simple necessity in the semantization process (Sallwürk, 1898, Sweet, 1899, Viëtor, 1882, Wendt, 1898). History shows that within the Reform Movement only a small group adopted extreme standpoints, one of which was the principle of absolute monolingualism: it is forbidden to use the mother tongue in a foreign language classroom.
This principle did not last long in the reality of the classrooms. Teachers, even those adopting such an extreme direct or natural method, quickly felt the limitations of monolingualism. Many articles of the time show the practical reactions against this strategy.

3. The eclectic period: 1900-1940

3.1. The International Conference of 1909

The reactions culminated in the international language teacher's conference of 1909, where a vast majority voted against the continued implementation of too strict procedures, among others monolingualism in the classroom. But research would continue, trying to combine the best of all possible methods and bringing us into a rich eclectic period.

3.2. H. Büttner

In one of the first major studies on semantization, Büttner (1910) adopts the principle of natural language command, namely that it is possible to have a direct tie between the foreign word and the concept, excluding the mother tongue medium; however, this tie can only come through integration: when presenting the foreign word it is not possible to eliminate the mother tongue reaction.

Büttner makes a distinction between "das Verstehen" (understanding) and "die Aneignung" (integration). He made a thorough study of the problems of unsatisfactory semantizations when applying extreme direct approaches. He rejects the argument that translations do not always cover concepts precisely, by studying these differences and concluding that the fundamental meanings for the fundamental vocabulary are indeed very much identical. Semantic nuances always come at a later stage, when the context will allow the student to grasp these nuances without reference to the mother tongue. The main advantage for a semantization through the mother tongue is the gain of time in the learning process.

For the second phase, namely "die Aneignung", Büttner develops a number of didactic strategies to develop and strengthen the direct tie between the foreign word and the concept, and to lessen, at the same time, the translation reflex.

The work of Büttner is a remarkable and quite thorough approach of the problems of semantization, providing at the same time very concrete suggestions for effective language learning.

3.3. Ernst Otto

Through a number of thorough experiments, Otto (1925) comes to the same conclusion as Büttner, namely that semantization through the mother tongue remains the most efficient and most precise way to transfer meaning. But he seems to go beyond Büttner by advocating the use
of bilingual exercises, also in the integration phase. One of his strategies is a remarkable combination of translation and automating drill, precisely meant to eliminate the word for word translation. In fact Otto defends the same principles as Büttner, namely to integrate the direct ties between foreign word and concept, but he does this more systematically over a longer period in the learning process.

3.4. Other important researchers of this period

Among those who continued to study semantization, we should mention people like Flagstad (1913), Aronstein (1926), Palmer (1917), Glauning (1910), Kirsten (1920). All these continue to recommend a bilingual approach for semantization, with a combination of various strategies to ensure the transfer of meaning. They warn against unilateral approaches.

4. Behaviorism and the audio-revolution: 1940-1965

In spite of all the research done and the quite effective strategies developed in the first 40 years of this century, all this is forgotten in a repetition of the Reform Movement, but much more extreme and much more arrogant in its statements of absolute originality.

However, it would be a mistake to think that the audio-movement of the 40's started out as a complete and clear-cut revolution. Historical research shows that the 40's stressed the importance of the behavioristic drill, but that the strategies were not that extreme at first. For example, in connection with semantization, translation was used without constraint in the presentation phase. The pattern-drill books contained the equivalent of the drills in the mother tongue, so that a student could check the meaning of what he was practising.

The extreme positions develop later, comparable to what happened within the Reform movement of the 19th century.

At the end of the fifties a few specialists in foreign language learning, but not in its history, decide to launch a so-called new strategy: monolingualism. In 1959 Nelson Brooks publishes his Language and Language Learning in which he posits without nuance for the English-speaking student who will learn a foreign language:

What the learner must not do:
- he must not speak English
- he must not learn lists of English-foreign language equivalents
- he must not translate from the foreign language into English

Brooks bases his ideas on the linguistic theories of Erwin and Osgood who studied the lingual systems of bilinguals and who made the famous distinction between compound bilinguals, using one conceptual system, and coordinate bilinguals, using two conceptual systems. For Brooks, language learning means to become a coordinate bilingual and thus the
conceptual system of the mother tongue must be avoided by teaching
directly and only in the target language. This reasoning is not only
simplistic, but it passes over all the fundamental research and insights
of the Reform Movement and the eclectic period.

Brooks' so-called discovery is repeated in a few other places, among
others in France, where the principles of the audio-visual methodology
also contain a categorical rejection of any semantization with the help of
the mother-tongue. For the French, however, it was more than a peda-
gogical issue. Their political action to preserve and strengthen the
French language in the many newly independent countries in Africa
entailed the "de-conditioning" of the mother tongue.

In the sixties monolingualism thus becomes again a battering-ram,
taught as a fundamental principle in the training of foreign language
teachers: as a teacher you are not supposed to use one word of the
mother tongue in classroom. Semantization will be done through visuals
and through contexts.

5. Since 1965: the cycle continues

5.1. The cognitive reaction: probing deeply into semantization

The reaction against extreme monolingualism came slowly, because the
audio-proponents defended their principles with a lot of pseudo-scientific
terminology and vague references to "recent discoveries in psychology and linguistics". The reaction came in the first place from academi-
cians, like Wilga Rivers (1964), J.B. Carroll (1966) and D. Ausubel
(1964). In his article, Ausubel stated that the "avoidance of the medias-
tional role of the native language" was "psychologically incompatible
with effective learning processes in adolescents".

The controversy resulting from these opposing standpoints led to scores
of experimental projects, illustrating among other things that monolin-
gualism certainly was not the final answer to semantization (Chastain &
Woerdehoff, 1968; Smith, 1969; Von Elek and Oskarsson, 1972;
Janssens, 1974).

But just like in the first half of this century, studies continued, re-
peating the research done and coming up with insights that often did
not match the depth and the nuances of work done decades ago.

However, four researchers deserve special mention for their specific
and thorough work on the problem of monolingual versus bilingual
semantization, namely C.J. Dodson (1967), W. Butzkamm (1973), T.T.
Meijer (1974) and S. Olsson (1973). Their conclusions are similar:

- monolingualism is a strategy without any scientific foundation
- monolingualism leads to more mother tongue interferences than bilin-
gual semantization
- a bilingual approach leads to more correct and stronger integration
  of new material
a bilingual approach does not lead to translation habits and does not hamper automatization of lingual reflexes.

Other researchers who have studied the same problem and who have come up with the same conclusions and with various didactic recommendations, include Hammerly (1982), Lübke (1971), Rattunde (1971), Dietrich (1973), Koster (1975), Hüllen (1971), Lim (1970).

5.2. New methodologies and old dogma's

But the cycle continues. New methodologies that have appeared in the eighties, although some did not posit monolingualism at first, tend to become entrenched in extremes by well-meaning revolutionaries. The principle of monolingualism is alive and well. The didactics of semantization continue to go through the same cycle. In classrooms all across the world many teachers are convinced they should never speak one word of the mother tongue to get the meaning of foreign words or sentences across. The arguments they use are those that were used by some extremists from the Reform Movement and from the audio-revolution. The careful refutations, the experimentations and insights of all who responded to these extremes are unknown to these teachers and new methodologists.

This is why it is helpful to teach them to look back. Only then can language teaching mature to a balanced and conscious science.

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