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DIALOGIC SEMIOTICS: THEORETICAL GROUNDWORK FOR RE-DESIGNING THE SYLLABUS IN FRENCH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE FOR UiTM BACHELOR-CANDIDATES

Patrick Tourchon, UiTMCS Jabatan Bahasa, Bahasa Perancis.

Abstract

The methods for teaching French as a Foreign Language are quite numerous, using books, audiocassettes, videos, CDs and CD-Roms. Moreover, since 1971, they all have been learner-centred, communication-based and interactive-wise. In this context, it is not clear why UiTM should need an in-house method for its Bachelor-candidate students. The following article therefore argues that UiTM could be the right institution for pioneering a method based, not on (structural or generative) linguistics, but on dialogic semiotics, an original integrative approach combining the works of Peirce (1948), Bakhtin (1971), Petöfi (1975), Hymes (1992) and Eco (1990).

1.0 INTRODUCTION: WHAT LINGUISTICS OVERLOOKS

1.1 A sample of genuine utterance

The major contemporary French writer, Patrick Modiano (born in 1945) has so far published some twenty novels centred on Paris, mostly during the troubled years of the Nazi occupation (1940–1945), which precede his birth. About the urban setting of his novels he once declared:

> Of course, as a teenager, I started reading Balzac's La Fille aux yeux d'or, and this sort of phantasmagorical vision of Paris we find in the Scènes de la vie parisienne fascinated me. We have mentioned the American detective novels: all these urban settings fascinate me. But what I mean is that all this is due to the chances of life, because I am also attracted to books set in natural landscapes, in the countryside, and what moved me most at times were passages of English novels like Thomas Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles, where he remarkably describes the harvest, or some passages in Tolstoy. That is to say, it is a sort of handicap I have: I would have dreamed, instead of urban settings, of being able to write a great novel à la Thomas Hardy, a great rural novel, a love story in a natural environment because it is magnificent. But life chances of course have made me a Parisian-born writer, a city product.

The problem is that this statement is a re-construction. Not only is it a translation from French, but the French oral statement would not have looked so confident and definite. The true words of Patrick Modiano were these:

> Bien sûr que *er* j'étais *er* de de quand j'av[ais] *er* adolescent *er* de le le d... cette esp[èce] *er* de*r*... ça a commencé par Balzac, tout ça, *La Fille aux yeux d'or*, tout ça, cette espèce de vision de Paris fant... fantasmagori[que]... [en]fin cette espèce de... qu'avait Balzac dans les sc... dans... dans les *Scènes de la vie parisienne*, tout ça... me fascinait... t... tout ce qui est... *hhh*, *er*, vous... quand on parlait d...des... *hmm*... des romans... noirs et tout ça, tout ce décor urbain me fascine mais je veux dire... ce sont les hasards de la vie parce que je je j'aime beau[coup], je je suis attiré aussi... *er*... pa...par des livres *er* comme c[eux] où où où... où ce sont des paysages naturels, où c'est la campagne, enfin les... les choses qui m'ont le plus ému finalement c'est quelquefois des... des passages de romans anglais comme chez Thomas Hardy, qui raconte le... *hhh*...d...dans *Tess d'U[r]bervilles* où il raconte le, le...*er*... admirablement quand il raconte des paysages de campagne, les... *er* les moi... moissons, ou dans tel er passage de er Tolstoi où il s'est... c'est-à-dire que... c'est... une sorte d'infirmité de ma part: je je j'aurais rêvé aussi de pouvoir ... *er*... au lieu de paysages urbains de...*slrrp srrp*... de pouvoir écrire un grand roman *er*... ...*fff*...*er* de de...on... on rêve comme ça de... à la Thomas [Hardy] [en]fin je veux dire de...d...*er*...un grand roman qui se passe à la campagne ou... une histoire d'amour er qui se passe... *er*...avec la...l...l...l...*er* ou ou t... d... dans un entourage de nature, de de campagne et tout ça parce que c'est magnifique mais... *hhh*... les hasards év... évidemment ont voulu que...*tst*...que je sois né à Paris...*er*...que *er*... je sois un produit... *er*... urbain. (Interview by Paule Zajderman & Antoine de Gaudemar, 1996).

In this transcription, the missing (unpronounced) parts of words appear between square brackets ([ ]); hesitations are marked by er (if it is short enough) or ...*er*... (for long hesitations including moments of silence); aspirations are transcribed as *hhh*; expirations as *fff*; tongue clicks as tst; and saliva being aspired and swallowed as *slrrp* or *srrp*.

Of course, it is easy to consider this as an extreme case, and to elaborate, as Bernard Rapp (the presenter who introduced the interview) did, on the fact that Patrick Modiano's "silences, hesitations, misfires, during his rare appearances on the television, are now legendary".

True enough, the man is now famous for his diction. But anybody who thinks while he speaks is likely to break the flow of his speech with such silences, hesitations and "misfires". Any oral utterance is subject (maybe only to a lesser extent) to such interruptions and revisions. Patrick Modiano is just an exemplary case.

1.2 A linguistic challenge

Now, this is a challenge for linguists. As Garrod (1999:389) notices, usually, "when investigating comprehension, researchers typically concentrate on people reading a piece of text or listening to someone reading a piece of text. When investigating production they typically concentrate on analysis of spoken monologue or citation speech" (Garrod 1999:389). They neglect dialogue. They even fail to recognise the "dialogic" character (Bakhtin, 1971) of any monologue: linguistics is the science of the polished language, of language as approved by a group of natives (be it standard or slang), as claimed as their own by a set of people. Linguistics so far has overlooked the utterance *in the process of its production*, or in the form it has when it is just delivered, not yet baked by any transcription.

Patrick Modiano offers us a genuine piece of such a raw utterance, and hence enables us to observe what linguistics conceals. He makes us aware that an utterance is a *negotiation*.

1.3 Monologic negotiation

Patrick Modiano in the first place seems to negotiate with himself. He weighs and measures the words he is about to use while using them. This for instance accounts for the way he actually utters the adjective "fantasmagorique": he utters it reluctantly, as if testing it ("fant..."), pronouncing the first syllable only. Then he stops, but does not find a better word; so he almost validates it as "fantasmagori...", but he still does not close the utterance. Finally he deletes it (the French *[en]fin* is used as often as the English "I mean..." when people want to modify what they have just said), showing that he still tries to find a better word to replace "fantasmagorique". He gives himself a reprieve by diluting his utterance with the empty sequence "this sort of..." ("Cette espèce de..."); then he gives up and goes back to the main point: Balzac's novels.

What is actually happening at that point is that the locutor is testing the word he intends to use against his own *encyclopædia*. One word, from a paradigm of paronyms (fantastic, fantasy, fantasmatic, etc.) crossed with a paradigm of synonyms (dreamlike, imaginary, surreal, etc.) occurred to him and he is checking it against these very paradigms. But he does not only check. He also negotiates it in the sense that he accepts the utterance (or drops it) after *bargaining* with the other close words, and he validates "fantasmagorique" by default. An utterance is always an *approximation* of a meaning: a tolerable nebula around the sense, a *monologic negotiation*.

1.4 Dialogic negotiation

Yet, Patrick Modiano also has to negotiate with his interlocutor to avoid huge misunderstandings. Indeed, he has to assess the tenor of his interlocutor's encyclopædia to find a way of putting things, which the listener can reasonably be expected to understand. Such is the stake when Patrick Modiano tries to generalise his view after referring to Honoré de Balzac. From one particular novel, La Fille aux yeux d'or, he enlarges the reference to what might be clearer to someone who would not have read this particular book: he widens the scope to the set, named so by Balzac himself, of the Scènes de la vie parisienne (Parisian Life Scenes). Thus, even if his interviewer knows nothing about Balzac, the reference to Paris (and therefore to the urban setting) is obvious in the general title itself.

But for a worrying character like Patrick Modiano's, this is hardly enough: this is still too limited, centred on his own encyclopædia. He then shifts the reference towards the American black detective novel[4] ("le roman noir"), because this is a part of his interlocutor's encyclopædia he has got a clue about before: hence his first word ("er… vous [= you]…". But, to admit that this is part of his encyclopædia as well, the writer immediately corrects his utterance: "quand on parlait" ("when we were talking…"), then checks his memory about the reference ("d…des romans… noirs" ["about the black novels"]) to insert it in a "tout ça" ("all that") which ultimately allows him to draw a conclusion ("tout ce décor urbain me fascine" ("all this urban setting fascinates me")), eventually confident that at least one example of such a setting will be familiar to his listener.

In other words, he bargains again, finding a middle term between the most striking example he finds in his own encyclopædia (but which might be unknown to his interlocutor) and a striking example taken from the other person's encyclopædia (which he cannot know entirely): he ends up with an example borrowed from an area where the two encyclopædias meet. Even though the interlocutor remains silent, Patrick Modiano's monologue keeps some traces of a truly *dialogic negotiation*.

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[4] This is usually known as 'noir' in English, as in Film Noir, a direct borrowing from the French– ED.

1.5 Rhetoric negotiation

Then comes his main point: he is an "urban" writer by pure chance. He would have dreamed of writing a rural novel, à la Thomas Hardy. But by saying so, he enters a rhetoric danger zone: he uses a proper name (Thomas Hardy) to quickly define a genre (the rural novel), which is a typical antonomasia. Now, some people do not have an ear for rhetoric, and Patrick Modiano knows it: if his immediate interlocutor can understand what he means, how about the viewers? And true enough, the TV-critic in Télérama, Cécile Challier, over-interprets this figure of speech: "Apologising for being only 'an urban product', Patrick Modiano reveals his most improbable dream: to have written Tess of the d'Urbervilles in Thomas Hardy's place", she writes.

No wonder then if this passage is one of the most "misfiring" in the whole interview:

I would have dreamt too of being able to...er... instead of urban settings, to... (saliva swallowed)... to be able to write a great novel... er...fff...er...to...to...we...we dream like that of...à la Thomas... 't least I mean, to... ter...a great novel set in the countryside or... a love story-er... set...er...with the...ther...er...or or i...i...in a natural environment, of of countryside and all that because it's magnificent.

Which means that Patrick Modiano is fighting hard to find a compromise between a very clear and evocative antonomasia to illustrate his frustration as a writer, and a more straightforward way, to avoid misunderstandings. But to find a compromise means to bargain again, to operate a tricky rhetoric negotiation aiming at avoiding both the banality of the real world (with its flat opposition between cities and countryside) and the over-subtlety of a "possible world" (Petöfi, 1975) where Thomas Hardy could be reincarnated into Patrick Modiano.

1.6 The need for a dialogic semiotics

It should then be clear by now that "there can be no such thing as an isolated utterance" (Bakhtin 1971:136). Even monologues are constant negotiations with encyclopædias and possible worlds. They deal with what linguistics has never taken into account: the theories of either "encyclopædias" or "possible worlds" are developed only in semiotics.

Moreover, it is clear too that a novel is not monologic either: Patrick Modiano's ones for instance are clearly in "dialogic relation" with Balzac's and Thomas Hardy's, as Mikhail Bakhtin would put it. Even sophisticated utterances then, such as fiction, are dialogic in essence: they result from a negotiation between too obvious a proximity to inspirational references (Balzac's *La Fille aux yeux d'or*) and too frustrating a craving for inaccessible genres (Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*). So Patrick Modiano's novels, though set in Paris like La Fille aux yeux d'or, also allow the characters to come from a boarding school in a forested suburb (Livret de famille (Modiano, 1977)) or to escape towards Polynesia, for instance (*Rue des Boutiques-Obscures* (Modiano, 1978)).

Therefore, to truly account for *real* utterances in a *real* language, we need a *dialogic semiotics*, combining:

1. A theory of interpretation (from a sign to its *interpretant*) as we find it in Charles Sanders Peirce's works (Peirce, 1948);
2. A theory of possible worlds as applied to texts by Petöfi (1975);
3. A theory of encyclopædias as extended by Eco (1990);
4. A theory of speech genres as created both by Hymes (1992) and Bakhtin (1971) to renew the rhetoric approach;
5. Bakhtin's dialogics (or *translinguistics*) (Bakhtin, 1971).

2.0   TEACHING FRENCH AS A REAL LANGUAGE

Thus, a method concerned with teaching a real language allowing real utterances in the real world would have to be based on the integrative approach we call here *dialogic semiotics*.   What would such a method look like?

2.1   Typology of negotiation

Since any speech, even a monologue, involves several degrees of negotiation, a dialogic-semiotic (hereafter, a dia-semiotic) method would be structured by these very levels of dialogism. That is to say that, instead of arbitrarily assuming that a given situation is "easier" to deal with than any other, the rationale would be the assessment of the negotiating skills involved.

For instance, speeches requiring only a **minimal negotiation** would be rated as **degree-1** speeches. Mainly, these include the **factual utterances**: nobody negotiates a self-introduction, nor a formal introduction, nor an identification form; similarly, people hardly negotiate an official statement nor a conference presentation, for these are ready-made speeches whose dialogism is carefully repressed. Thus, though traditional methods exclude statements and presentations from their first chapters to include only self-introduction and identification forms, a dia-semiotic method would readily include them, for their grammar can be simple too.

In the same way, speeches based on a **formalised negotiation** would come next, rated as **degree-2** speeches, for these include only **elaborative utterances**, developing the factual (degree-1) utterances: in interviews for instance, which usually come after many other chapters in traditional methods, the interviewed persons mainly elaborate on their identity by talking about their family, or on their occupation by describing their tasks, or on their tastes, their projects, etc., which are also based on facts and do not require sharp negotiating skills.

Then come the **punctual negotiation** speeches, that is, those without any emotional stake, therefore rated as **degree-3** speeches, for they include only **informative utterances**: the two locutors want to make sure that they got the information right, be it about the time, the place, the other guests, the food on a menu, and so on. This starts requiring negotiating skills such as adaptability: the ability to remain accurate while putting things in several different ways.

Yet, the negotiating skills involved do not require so wide a vocabulary. It becomes trickier when a **lexical negotiation** or a **generic negotiation** occurs, because the right interpretation of a word, a phrase or an instruction is at stake. Now, this happens every time in the workplace: What are we really supposed to do? How formal must our speech be, or how familiar can it sound? Etc. These issues are seldom explicitly addressed in the usual methods, where interpretation (lexical negotiation) problems are limited to the understanding of exercises instructions, and where formal versus familiar speech forms (generic negotiation, i.e. negotiation about the appropriate speech genre) are reduced in French to the choice between the pronouns "tu" or "vous". Yet, much more can be studied about these **degree-4** and **degree-5** speeches, involving **pragmatic** and **social utterances**.

Still, the negotiating skills required for the degrees 4 and 5 are basic compared to those we need when the conversation implies a personal stake. In such an **emotional negotiation** we have to be extra-careful about the effect our speech will have on our interlocutor: the slightest mistake might cause an unexpected reaction we shall not know how to deal with. Therefore, speeches involving such **sensitive utterances** are **degree-6** speeches.

One could of course find many other degrees. No doubt that pilot courses would allow, through practice, to refine the typology indicated here.

Let us notice though that the most difficult negotiation of all is the **dialectal negotiation**, namely the translation, where we have to find some agreement between two largely incompatible idiolects. Such speeches dealing with **foreign utterances** are ultimate degree, **degree-n**, speeches.

But intimate reflections, when we think for ourselves, trying to elaborate new ideas (at least new to ourselves), are just short of this degree n: the **conceptual negotiation** is a **degree-n–1** speech, testing dictionaries and encyclopædias (in the semiotic sense we used about Patrick Modiano) and assuming a great mastery of the language to enable the locutor to produce such **innovative utterances**.

Only the **psychoanalytic negotiation** seems slightly less tricky, but still requiring high negotiating skills for any such **interpretative utterance** to be reliable: this clearly is still a **degree-n–2** speech.

Needless to say that the degrees n, $n - 1$, $n - 2$, ..., $n - x$, are out of our practical scope. They just remind us of what we must not ask our students to do: any translation, for instance, is but a rough approximation at an early stage.

Or course, some of the ideas uttered here are not new: they only confirm previous views. But some are not so common, and it might be useful to refer to such a framework as this typology of negotiation to assess the relevance of future practical choices.

2.2 Material

The linguistic approach to any language leads us to focus on what has been coined as "Examplese". It means that linguists are busy arguing over phrases and sentences which exist only as **examples** and would never be actually uttered by any native. Such phrases and sentences are not agrammatical: the grammar of the given language, at least as linguists understand it, allows them. They are just unlikely ever to be produced, unnatural, not in use. To ask about the weather forecast, for instance, no native French locutor would ever say: "quelle est la météo?" ("what is the weather forecast?"), though there is nothing grammatically wrong there. People would either ask "que dit la météo?" ("what do they say about the weather forecast?"), or "quel temps fera-t-il demain?" ("what will the weather be tomorrow?"). "Quelle est la météo?" is a typical Examplese question we are likely to find only in French textbooks (Trevisi et al., 1997:65). So, if the aim is to teach the real language, there is only one way to avoid printing Examplese sentences: the method must be based exclusively on genuine documents, that is, on documents collected in France and not designed for teaching.

2.3 Exercises

When it comes to exercises, even recent methods (like the one currently in use in UiTM for bachelor-candidates (Trevisi et al., 1997)) stick to a division between vocabulary and grammar, and ignore other types of exercises and training.

Yet, half-baked grammatical exercises, for instance, are the first ones to lead to Examplese: either the original sentence or the student's is likely to be unnatural if special attention is not paid to the tiniest details.

Now, how about negotiations and problem solving? These are the keys to the dia-semiotic approach, but no textbook so far has ever included exercises in this field.

1. **Problem solving**. Given an utterance like Patrick Modiano's, what would be the most economic way (Eco, 1990) of making a similar point? Though solving this problem involves a negotiation on what matters and what does not, it has nothing to do with minimal sentences. The sentences can be complex, the vocabulary can remain unchanged, but the result must be an entropic text, not calling for too much energy to be interpreted. Since learners, by definition, have a limited competence, such textual entropy is what they need. Yet, textbooks never allow any practice in this field.

2.   **Negotiation**. To assume that an utterance is either grammatically correct or wrong offers little space for negotiation. Whereas its appropriateness to a given genre is purely a matter of negotiated consensus. Therefore, there are two ways of dealing with a non-standard student production. If, for instance, instead of saying "It's me" ("C'est moi"), the student says "This am I" ("Ce suis-je"), one can rate his sentence as "wrong" and dismiss it. Or, one can ask students to discuss, to negotiate about the genre in which such an utterance could become acceptable. Probably, poetry will be mentioned sooner or later, especially lyric poetry. It would then be interesting to confirm that the 15th-century Parisian poet François Villon, in one of his Ballads, has actually uttered "Ce suy je". True enough, such negotiative exercises call for a facilitator who has a good mastery of genres, and it might be the reason why handbooks ignore them. Yet, they enrich the students' own mastery of genres, and turn "mistakes" into an opportunity to think further and deeper.

3.0   CONCLUSION

In a short article, one can of course give but a few examples and gross guidelines. Moreover, the practicality of the ideas presented above has to be tested in a pilot class. The purpose here is only to launch a research process. Its Phase I would be the collection of material, the design of exercises and their classification according the degree of negotiation they require. Phase II would be the implementation of pilot courses where feedback from the students would be scrutinised in order to negotiate the final form of the new method. But eventually, not only would UiTM be provided with an in-house French syllabus, it would also be enabled to licence a new approach: the stake is far beyond material convenience.

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