

Teaching Conversation Analysis through the Selected Short Stories of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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ABSTRACT

Language and literature are inseparably related to each other. Literature is a practical tool for teaching language and a literary text is a storehouse of linguistic resources that provides the right context to explore and experiment with language samples. Linguistics is that branch of English Studies which attempts to study language in a scientific manner. In this domain, pragmatics harps on the use of language in a social context whereas, sociolinguistics emphasizes on studying the socio-cultural effects of language. However, while teaching linguistics, there are concepts like content, discourse and critical discourse analysis that can be better explained with the help of excerpts from novels or extracts from short stories and drama. The semiotic events as depicted in literary texts are rich in local flavour and have a greater scope for providing the perfect platform to examine the communication patterns. To blend theory with practice, it is mandatory for the instructor to develop resources that can give the target group a first-hand experience of using techniques in conversation analysis. These can be self-created dialogues or chunks from literary texts produced by authors across the globe. This paper therefore, is sought to analyse the method in which conversation analysis can be taught to Indian students through the selected short stories from the collection Arranged Marriage (1996) written by a famous Indian diasporic author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

Keywords: - Conversation Analysis, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, code-mixing, code-switching, turn-taking, adjacency pair

I INTRODUCTION

Language and literature are inseparably related to each other and the field of English studies remains incomplete without necessitating the combination of English language and English literature. Literature, in fact, is a practical tool for teaching language; and the study of linguistics can be enhanced by using literary genres as devices to elaborate on concepts related to phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, as well as pragmatics.

Language functions in many ways and the context in which language works is the main area of study in pragmatics. Pragmaticians study the context behind the meaning-making process. Communication is a complicated process and cannot be studied in a linear fashion. Similarly, the way speech-acts occur in several situations and the way social milieu contributes in pouring more meaning into the speech-acts is the basis for sociolinguistics. Both the sub-branches of linguistics incline towards the functional aspect of language whereby, pragmatics harps on the use of language in a social context whereas, sociolinguistics emphasizes on studying the socio-cultural effects of language. If taken in consonance, these fields of linguistics deal with the comprehension of the utterances done by different kinds of speakers in different settings. To explain these nuances to undergraduates or postgraduates, one needs a framework that can help students relate to the concepts in a manner that enumerates the practicality of these concepts.

II LITERATURE SURVEY

According to Mahapatra (1996, p. 37), “A very important aspect of the language is learnt through artistic and literary expressions”. From a linguist’s perspective, a literary text is a storehouse of linguistic resources and also provides the right context to explore and experiment with language samples. These samples in turn become the best mnemonic tools for students to not only understand but also remember the concepts from sociolinguistics or pragmatics.

Cook (2008, p. 23) analyses the differences between communicative competence and pragmatic competence and comments, “Sheer knowledge of language has little point if speakers cannot use it appropriately for all the activities in which they want to take part...”. Therefore, the real knowledge of the language gets manifested only when one uses it in the right context for the appropriate reason. Literature does provide that context for discovering the theoretical underpinnings in linguistics. The genres of literature are dense with purposeful language use that gives an opportunity to learners to engage in genuinely communicative activities as directed by the facilitator in the classroom. It is therefore, important to select the right kind of texts for the teaching of language through literature. In the Indian context, while teaching linguistics, the use of literature produced by British authors or American authors can be limited to 20 percent of the syllabus at the undergraduate level. At the postgraduate level, the world literature can encompass 40 percent of the syllabus. But the language teacher should majorly depend on genres produced by the Indian

diaspora that will provide a more fertile ground for analysing relatable language in context.

III OBJECTIVE

Usually, the canonical texts for literature syllabus are sufficient to give the Indian undergraduates and postgraduates an insight into the literary studies. However, while teaching linguistics, there are concepts like content analysis, discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, so on and so forth that need to be explained with the help of excerpts from novels or extracts from short stories and drama. The semiotic events as depicted in these texts are rich in local flavour and have a greater scope for providing the perfect platform to examine the communication patterns. Hence, this paper is sought to analyse the method in which conversation analysis can be taught to Indian undergraduate or postgraduate students through the selected short stories of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni – an Indian diasporic author. Her famous works of fiction have garnered accolades at the global level; many of her creative writings have already been adapted into movies. The focus of the present study is on the selected short stories from Divakaruni's famous short story collection *Arranged Marriage* (1996).

IV TEACHING CONVERSATION ANALYSIS THROUGH SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

The three selected short stories are 'Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs'; 'The Word Love'; and 'Doors'. These stories depict real-life conversations in a realistic yet simplistic manner. The stories revolve around female characters as protagonists and portray conflicts faced by women through subtle conversations. Conversation Analysis (CA) is that branch of Interactional Sociolinguistics which studies the meaning-making process through the medium of social interactions. The social interactions illustrated in these selected short stories represent women roles and responsibilities in the domestic and professional spheres. The characters speak candidly in the stories about the psychological pressures that they undergo and these talks create a vital nexus to closely observe the non-verbal aspects of communication alongside turn-taking and adjacency pairs. Since CA as a super-set is devoted to studying meaningful behaviour through particular situations in time-place-language, its sub-sets code-switching and code-mixing also play a crucial role in the selected short stories of Divakaruni.

The first selected text is 'Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs' in which the reader gets to experience the story of a young Bengali girl who comes to America for her further studies. She is baffled by the surroundings, and the

sentences that people use; for example, when the air hostess says "No problem" in response to her apology, she is taken by surprise as she had never heard anyone use this expression before. On one hand, she is excited and elated to be in a new country which gives her hope for a better future, but on the other hand, she also misses her friends and family back at home in India. She has a sense of dislocation and disorientation if she would be able to adjust to all the new things and people around her. She also feels nostalgic when she goes out for a walk with her aunt, and she misses her homeland Calcutta, and the way things were there. The title of the story 'Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs' actually is a representation of the American Dream that Jayanti, the protagonist, has when she first comes to America. It represents how she thought that life in America would be like, easy, fun, exciting, and smooth, and how she thought that she would get married to a man who would have a house with 'silver pavements, and golden roofs'. But that dream is far from being achieved, and she realizes this when she sees her aunt and uncle's house, and again after the encounter with the boys who called them "Nigger". She realizes that she, or Indians in general, would forever be considered as outsiders in America.

In an English studies classroom, the activities with regard to code-mixing, adjacency pairs, and turn-taking need to be integrated while discussing the text. A pre-teaching activity can be to ask students to find all the Indian terms in the story. Once the list is collected, the facilitator can introduce the concept of code-mixing to the students. After the explanation, the students' attention can be drawn towards phrases like "every year at *Bijoya*", "spinach-lentil *dal*", "yogurt cucumber *raita*", "fried potato *pakor*s", "crisp golden *papads*", "sweet white *kheer*", "her *chachaji*", etc. There can be a post-teaching activity related to analysis of conversations specifically connected with imagery. This particular story is full of instances of visual, kinesthetic, organic, olfactory and tactile imageries that build on the essence of the visualization evoked by crisp remarks. One of the most critical phrases used in the story is "*kala admi*" in the middle of a conversation that appears right on the sixth page of the 16-page story. Although there is no repetition of this phrase in the whole story, this utterance is culturally-loaded. Students can be made to realize how language does not always work in a neutral fashion. The way certain visual imageries form the crux of the story can be the central point of discussion in relation to cultural nuances being embedded in conversations.

The second selected text is 'The Word Love' which is rich in metaphors, symbols and story within the story. Though the story's central theme is women dilemmas, it allows the readers to perceive the thematic thread in multiple ways. The writer employs figurative language to enhance the beauty of her writing. Throughout the story, the mother (central character) herself is absent, but her

speech is presented through the protagonist. The oscillation between the present and past events gets easily interpolated with the help of stream of consciousness technique as the protagonist constantly keeps reviewing her actions and decisions from the lens of her mother. In fact, the story begins abruptly and the reader can feel the tension mounting right from the start of the narrative. The very first activity that the facilitator can incorporate in the classroom is to ask students to pick and choose such dialogues in the story that project uneasiness. These statements can further be discussed in light of how the conversations help unfold the discourse. All the collected samples can be grouped together to introduce the concept of turn-taking in CA. Because, one interesting aspect is that both, the protagonist and her mother lack direct identification in the story as their names are not unveiled till the end but surprisingly, most of the speech acts are based on them. On the contrary, the second important character who is the protagonist's lover has been introduced as Rex – boyfriend living in the U.S.; yet, he has not been given much voice in the story.

Another activity that can be conducted with the help of this text is advancing on the concept of code-mixing by introducing code-switching. Students are already familiar with the concept of code-mixing as introduced in the activities of the previous short story. Now, with this literary text, certain utterances like “You’re not even listening”; “You’re blaming me for this mess between your mother and yourself”; “What did you do *Missybaba*, that was so bad?” etc. can be highlighted in the text. Students can then be asked to revert to the given utterances in their mother tongues and create short asymmetric conversations between imaginary characters. Such dialogue pieces implementing code-switching patterns can then be recorded with the help of a mobile phone – it is important to collect at least 10 such samples. Then the class can be divided into groups of 4-5 students each. These groups will then role play with the help of the collected samples. Some groups can also improvise on the scripts and enact a short skit having instances of both code-mixing and code-switching by also imbibing self-talk, refusal, rejection, complaint, so on and so forth from the given story line.

The third selected text is ‘Doors’ which begins by clearly stating the problem statement right in the opening sentence. The curiosity of the reader builds as soon as the story begins because at the back of his/her mind, the reader keeps correlating the phenomena with the title of the text. Particularly in this text as well as the other selected texts in general, the author tries to unravel the strength and thoughtful mind of women in dealing with the conflicts. Preeti – the central character in this story, tries her level best to overcome the hurdles that come her way along with balancing the social burden while confronting the society. She tries to take a bold step in the narrative but is stopped by her conscience that gets

manifested in the role of her husband. Once this context is discussed in the classroom, the facilitator can extend the discussion of turn-taking and also introduce the concept of adjacency pairs in the context of CA. One of the major activities that can be experimented while reconnoitring these CA concepts is the task of role reversal – the facilitator can conduct this as a paired activity wherein the person sitting adjacent to the student will take his/her partner's role and the partner will do vice versa while learning adjacency pair examples.

In a similar fashion, to reinforce the concepts of code-mixing and code-switching, this story can prove to be extremely beneficial. The text is densely loaded with code-mixing examples – words like *yaar*, *bhai*, *bhaviji*, *amreekan*, etc. in addition to some funny dialogues are recurrent in the conversations. These utterances can be converted into full-fledged code-switching examples just to ensure whether students have understood the difference between the two CA terms i.e., code-mixing and code-switching. One interesting feature incorporated in Preeti's utterances is the idea of mirroring. The repetitive phrases in the dialogues of the mother and the daughter get mirrored; for example, “And besides, he's mellowed over the years. You should have seen him when we first got married.” “Well, I'm sure with all the training you've given me, I'll be able to mellow Deepak in no time!” Preeti's mother uses more of interrogatives whereas both Preeti and Deepak (Preeti's fiancé) use more of exclamatory sentences. These kinds of sentences pace towards the climax of the story. The whole text vividly uses turn-taking instances whereby the conversations are rich in involving interruptions, pauses, and silences in the speech acts. Here, the facilitator can ask students to compare the conversations in this story with the utterances in another text with the same title “The Door” – a short story by E. B. White. Students will get a fair idea of the concept of turn-taking through this comparative analysis. One CA concept related to turn-taking well employed in this story is that of the adjacency pair. Since there are three speakers in this story, the concept of adjacency pair can be elucidated in a better way through the activity of colour coding – adjacent pairs can be highlighted in the same colour and there can use of different colours to exhibit departures, and especially the dispreferred responses in the conversations in the text. The temporisations can be highlighted using a different colour and students can be asked to analyse advices, accuses, and also apologies in this regard.

V CONCLUSION

In this way, literature can be used in a language classroom to discuss concepts in linguistics. By involving the above-mentioned techniques, students will be able to get a first-hand experience of CA; the activities will prove to be a catalyst in absorbing the practical-oriented linguistic

theories. The facilitator can create similar activities as exemplified in this paper to allow adult learners to immerse in the concepts of code-mixing, code-switching, turn-taking, and adjacency pairs. Finally, this will arouse the target group's interest in understanding the cultural inferences in the language used by different people. Students will automatically be willing to know more about the several nuances in language as a by-product of culture. Furthermore, the pedagogical implications of teaching conversation analysis through the selected literary texts of Indian diaspora are in multitudes and cannot be limited to only the few activities mentioned in this study. Thus, it is the responsibility of the language studies scholars to take this research ahead and develop a curriculum in the context of Higher Education Institutions in India with regard to teaching interactional sociolinguistics through diasporic literature.

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