

## THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE TO NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS

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This paper is mainly concerned with problems occurring in the teaching of (English) literature to first-year university students in Finland. However, I hope my comments will also be felt to be relevant to literature teaching at school, both in the native language and the foreign language. I would like to touch on three problems in particular.

### 1. What can we build on?

Of course, our students come from a different cultural background, with a different set of familiar cultural references and it is natural that they will not always be so familiar with e.g. the Greek and Roman myths that a student in England has probably met. On the other hand, it is a little surprising that they often seem to lack an acquaintance with well-known biblical stories. But neither of these differences are as problematic as the fact that the students often appear not to have had much experience of reading literature even in their native language. I am aware of the pressures of the syllabus in the year or two preceding the matriculation exam, but it is nevertheless sad that literature, especially poetry, seems to have suffered from a certain neglect. Insofar as it has been taught, up to now at least, there seems to have been considerable variation in the amount and style of the teaching. Some students, for instance, have read quite a lot, but others say they have studied very little Finnish literature at school, and that the Finnish lessons were mostly on the development of their own written Finnish. Moreover, the impression I get from our first-year students is that the literature teaching they have had has been mainly concerned with the explanation of difficult words and the general message of the whole. Fair enough, but two things have perhaps been underestimated: close reading, and the aesthetic aspect.

Before we can expect our students to study an English text in any depth, it is reasonable to assume that they can do so in their native language. The fact that many have not done this suggests that one good way to start a course in English literature is actually to look first at a piece of Finnish (Swedish) with the kind of sensitivity that we expect them eventually to be able to show in their reading of an English text. One poem I have found most successful from this point of view is Aila Meriluoto's Lasimaa-laus (see below, p. ). Read at the beginning of a tutorial class, it serves well to illustrate one attitude of an artist to his/her work, and the act of artistic creation itself. A discussion of expected and unexpected words and structures leads to an awareness of new connections between things and ideas, new meanings, and an appreciation of the aesthetic experience itself (see action 2.2. below).

The school's (and often also university's) apparent neglect of the aesthetic experience offered by a literary work of art is most depressing. There is an enormous gap between what actually seems to be done in class and the acknowledged power of literature to move to evoke feelings of pleasure and even joy.

Which leads to the second major problem.

## 2. How to combine an analytical approach with a creative/experiential/aesthetic approach?

2.1. It is clearly no good just "giving the facts", "explaining the meaning"; nor is it enough to rely solely on intuitive subjective responses - "Yes, I like that bit." Somehow a connection must be made between these two approaches. Here I think one has to start by looking at how the author is using the language, and then proceed to what meanings are thus being expressed, what is being said. So what we need is a way of making the experience of linking the how to the what into an aesthetic experience.

One theoretical model which seems to do just this is Greima's game theory (briefly outlined by Tarasti in Kanava 1981/7). This model proposes that one way at looking at artistic creativity is to see it as a game ("jeu") with normative rules, such as the permitted moves in chess. Playing this game produces a feeling of "aisance" - freedom, relaxation, pleasure. The better the player - i.e. the more developed his awareness of the choice of moves available - the more "aisance" he experiences.

Let us extend this approach to cover the receiver's reaction to a work of art, to the reader's appreciation of, say, a poem. By analogy, the greater

the reader's sensitivity to the choices made by the writer, the greater the enjoyment. Seeing what the writer has done with the language needs to be an active discovery process if it is to be its own reward; and the analysis of a text should thus inspire, and be inspired by, the same natural curiosity that urges man to ask of any phenomenon: "how does it work?"

The implication for the teaching of literature is that students need to be made aware of increasingly delicate and complex rules or sets of choices. In what follows I shall outline four major levels of such rules and illustrate them with reference to two poems: Meriluoto's Lasimaalaus and Spender's An elementary school classroom in a slum (see below). I shall not offer a detailed analysis of the poems, but take examples from each to show how recourse can be made to these levels of rules (not necessarily explicitly) in the discussion of a poem. I choose a Finnish poem as well as an English one in order to stress how important it is for (first-year) students to realise that the same kinds of things are going on in both the foreign language and their native language.

2.2. I. The first level of rules is that of the normal rules of grammar; no comment required here.

II. The second one we can define as that of the normal rules of use (acceptability, appropriateness). By this I mean the use of normal non-figurative language, including its different styles (registers). Thus, in line 17 of Spender's poem the clause "Surely Shakespeare is wicked" marks a change in the structure of the poem partly because it is the first clause that could be said to be in a natural colloquial style. Coming after the complex new syntax of the first two verses it brings to mind the simple innocent questioning of a child, cutting straight through to the point.

III. The third level is that of rules of use that are different from those of normal non-literary communication, i.e. what we may call marked usage. Appreciating the effect of these rules naturally presupposes an awareness of the norms that are being broken, i.e. of level II. This kind of usage has been discussed elsewhere under the terms foregrounding (Leech 1969), deflection (Halliday 1971), arrest and release (Sinclair 1966), etc.

Figurative language is one example of this kind of non-neutral use, in particular the whole field of metaphor ("värit nöyrät" (line 1), "reciting a disease" (line 5), etc.).

Unusual, although quite grammatical structures can also be of significance to the interpretation of a poem. Both poems here, for instance, use a lot of listing structures: Meriluoto in order to catalogue the range

of subjects of the artist, and Spender to mark the lifeless, object-like quality of the classroom environment.

New patterns are also set up over and above normal syntactic patterns (patterns of equivalence: Jakobson 1960, Levin 1964). In Lasimaalaus, for instance, the repeated links with ja stress an important aspect of the meaning of the poem. And one notices the prominence given in the first two verses to the grammatical object - preposed, or expanded to a list - thus distracting attention from the agent and even from the action and focussing on the results of the action: the objects are almost all factitive. In the Spender poem one can point to the repeated verbless sentences at the beginning, the sudden effect of the finite verb live breaking this pattern in line 7, and the new pattern of the dynamic verbs break, run and open in the last verse.

Other meaning-giving patterns not found in normal usage are those formed by sound and rhythm. Alliteration is less common in English than in Finnish, but it and assonance are often used onomatopoeically to stress the sense ("like bottle bits on stones", line 22). Note also the effects created by metre (Meriluoto lines 34-5: "aukee / maailma", where the enjambement floods forward over the end of the line; and "Break" (Spender line 29), interrupting the predominant iambic rhythm).

IV. The fourth level is that of different rules of grammar (deviance, deviation). These can easily bring problems of comprehension to the non-native reader, but, once realised, they can be seen to contribute enormously to the effect of poems such as the two here.

Spender's verbless sentences were mentioned above: their very incompleteness symbolizes that of the classroom. The verbs only begin to come when the poet's own feelings are allowed to invade the sterile world of the school, which then becomes "normalized".

Words can be reclassified: if värit can be nöyrät (line 1), then they must somehow be [+ human], or at least [+ animate]. If "these children / wear skins peeped through by bones" (lines 21-2), then not only are their skins [+ garment], i.e. somehow artificially made, but also the verb peep through is reclassified as transitive, allowing a passive, on the analogy of e.g. wear through or cut through. Quite apart from the metaphor, that is, a sentence like This window has been peeped through is normally ungrammatical: a point that helps to show how Spender succeeds in stressing the extreme passivity of the children and their skeletal thinness.

New rules of possible word order are set up, because of the demands of stress and rhythm. See how the syntax is twisted to allow the Finnish verbs to take final position in lines 19-21: the action is what matters here. Then instead of the normal grammatical order olevaista kietovan verkon we have line 22, with olevaista precisely enmeshed. Note further, in lines 31-33, the three adjectives valmiit, selvä, suunnatonta placed after their nouns, as if to stress that at this stage it is not the object itself that counts but its quality. In the Spender, notice the extraordinary stress given to theirs (line 33) on account of its syntactic opacity.

In the English, new rules for articles are invented: in the context of the poem it is evidently possible to use the zero article with singular count nouns (e.g. "in tree room", line 8). There are several instances of this new rule, so that a strange new hybrid class of noun is produced: a count noun so vague, unspecified, and lacking in shape or substance that it becomes like an indefinite mass noun - which of course reinforces the point of the poem.

### 3. Motivation

Sad that sparks of interest in literature seem to have been as often killed as kindled by the time students arrive at the university. Perhaps an approach such as that outlined above could help?

In the first place this kind of analysis comprises a powerful element of discovery, which can lead to genuine "ahaa" experiences. There are discoveries to be made about how language can be used to express new meanings, to express something of a reality (e.g. the world of feeling) beyond the reach of "normal" language. Seeing "how it works" itself gives rise to "aisance", especially if what is said is seen to be worth saying.

Secondly, linking the new (e.g. an English poem) with the more familiar (Finnish) makes the new seem less impossibly distant.

And lastly, this approach incorporates a weighty argument for the social relevance of literature which often has a strong appeal to students (see Widdowson 1975). A sensitivity to language, to its enormous and endlessly flexible potential for the expression of meaning, is the best defence against authoritarian attempts to use language to control minds and behaviour.

## References

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Aila Meriluoto

LASIMAALAUUS

- Te värit nöyrät, odotusta täynnä,  
näin käsin varovin ja varmoin sentään  
ma teidät lasipintaan levitän.  
Maailman suuren meren siihen maalaan  
5 sen suuren meren, josta vihrein hiuksin  
maanosat niinkuin unet nousevat.  
Ja niitten halki tummat joet ujuu,  
ja kaupunkeja kohooa ja vaipuu,  
ja vuoret kulkee ruskein juovaviitoin,  
10 ne ruskein viitoin mereen vaeltaa.
- Ma linnun maalaan kaikki laulut suussaan  
ja kalan kaikki vedet hartioillaan  
ja karhun kaikki raivo kämmenessään  
ja käärmeen kaikki myrkky kielellään.  
15 Ja vielä aivan pienen kukan maalaan,  
kuin uinuis siinä kevääät tulevaiset  
ja sateen siunaus ja päivän lämpö  
ja siemen sataan kukkaspolveen uuteen.
- Ma sitten siveltimeen hienoon tartun,  
20 hopeaväriin viileään sen kastan  
ja rantein herkin kaiken yli maalaan  
ma verkon olevaista kietovan.  
Maan pinnasta sen ytimiin se tunkee  
ja karhun kämmenestä kulkee kukkaan,  
25 kalliohuiput laaksoihin se liittää  
ja raunioihin nuoret kaupungit.  
Ei mikään irrallaan voi mistään olla,  
ei mikään milloinkaan voi olla toisin,  
ja ikuinen on kaiken yhteys.
- 30 Niin viimein auringolle sanon: paistal  
Ja leimahtaen herää värit valmiit,  
niin että alla joka muodon selvän  
näät tuhat merkitystä suunnatonta  
ja hetken huiman edessäsi aukee  
35 maailma niinkuin alkuperässä!

Stephen Spender

AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOM IN A SLUM

Far far from gusty waves, these children's faces.  
Like rootless weeds, the torn hair round their pallor.  
The tall girl with her weighed-down head. The paper-  
seeming boy with rat's eyes. The stunted unlucky heir  
5 Of twisted bones, reciting a father's gnarled disease,  
His lesson from his desk. At back of the dim class  
One unnoted, mild and young: his eyes live in a dream  
Of squirrels' game, in tree room, other than this.

On sour cream walls, donations. Shakespeare's head  
10 Cloudless at dawn, civilized dome riding all cities.  
Belled, flowery, Tyrolese valley. Open-handed map  
Awarding the world its world. And yet, for these  
Children, these windows, not this world, are world,  
Where all their future's painted with a fog,  
15 A narrow street sealed in with a lead sky,  
Far far from rivers, capes, and stars of words.

Surely Shakespeare is wicked, the map a bad example  
With ships and sun and love tempting them to steal -  
For lives that slyly turn in their cramped holes  
20 From fog to endless night? On their slag heap, these children  
Wear skins peeped through by bones, and spectacles of steel  
With mended glass, like bottle bits on stones.  
Tyrol is wicked; map's promising a fable:  
All of their time and space are foggy slum,  
25 So blot their maps with slums as big as doom.

Unless, governor, teacher, inspector, visitor,  
This map becomes their window and these windows  
That open on their lives like catacombs,  
Break, O break open, till they break the town  
30 And show the children to green fields, and make their world  
Run azure on gold sands, and let their tongues  
Run naked into books, the white and green leaves open  
The history theirs whose language is the sun.