Suggestions for a 'cross-cultural semiotic approach' to foreign language teaching: The case of Italian in Japan

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Reference data:
Zamborlin, C. (2006). Suggestions for a 'cross-cultural semiotic approach' to foreign language teaching: The case of Italian in Japan. In K. Bradford-Watts, C. Ikeguchi, & M. Swanson (Eds.) *JALT2005 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

This paper is divided into a theoretical and an experimental section. In the theoretical part I put forward a 'cross-cultural semiotic approach' which appears to be particularly suitable to foreign language teaching contexts characterized by few chances of exposure to the foreign language and culture. In the experimental section I explore how Japanese learners of Italian can perceive certain signals of the Italian culture, and how they can re-interpret certain Japanese culture-specific signals by attempting to observe them from an 'Italian viewpoint'.

記号論的観点から日本におけるイタリア語教育について考察した。文化が違う国においてイタリア語を外国語として学ぶ場合、文法のみでなく異文化理解も重要である。イタリア文化と日本文化のいくつかの「記号」(概念、習慣、文明の作品等)の比較分析を通してどのように興味深いイタリア語教育教材を作れるかについて考察した。

This paper puts forward what I propose to call a 'cross-cultural semiotic approach' to foreign language teaching, that is to say an approach which

1) Focuses on cross-cultural communication

2) Calls attention to the fact that objects, concepts, values and behaviors that speakers talk about obey semiotic laws.

The foreign language context I will take into account is that of IFL (Italian as a Foreign Language) in Japan.

The paper is divided into two sections. In the first section I will briefly give an account on the state of the art of IFL in Japan and discuss the theoretical background of the approach I am proposing. In the second part I will offer two examples of class activities.

In my view, the approach I am suggesting here appears particularly suitable to FL teaching contexts characterized by few chances of exposure to the target language/culture. By 'exposure' I mean the access to the target language/culture through media (i.e., broadcast news, newspapers, movies and TV programs) and interaction with (native) speakers of the target language.

Background

IFL in Japan

In Japan, Italian is mainly acquired as a *lingua d'arte* ('language of art') or *lingua di piacere* ('language of pleasure'), that is to say, for educational or recreational purposes. Besides language schools and cultural centers, courses of Italian are generally offered at universities of fine arts and music, attended by art majors and opera specialists. Although few studies on IFL in Japan have been produced so far, it should be recognized that this field is gradually expanding, as the interest Japanese show for Italy has considerably increased in the recent years. In this respect, it is worth noticing that in October 2005 at the Italian Cultural Institute in Tokyo the *Gruppo di Intervento e Studio nel Campo dell'Educazione Linguistica* (Group of Intervention and Study in the Field of Linguistic Education) was officially established. The Group aims at improving the quality of Italian education in Japan under the supervision of the *Società di Lingustica Italiana* (Italian Linguistic Society).

To offer a brief literature review on IFL in Japan, it should be mentioned that most of the studies have focused on reading methods and grammatical approaches (Nannini 1997, 2000; Zamborlin 2003); cross-cultural communication (Nannini 2002, 2005; Zamborlin 2004, forthcoming); techniques of inductive grammar (Zamborlin 2005a); motivation and communication apprehension (Gioè 2005a, 2005b).

Compared to EFL (English as a Foreign Language), which is mainly learned around the world as a *lingua franca* (i.e., a language used not only for the interaction with native speakers but also with people coming from different countries and speaking different native languages), IFL is obviously learned in order to communicate with people living in a small territory. Italian, in fact, is the official language of Italy, the Republic of San Marino (geographically situated inside the Italian peninsula), the neighboring cantons of Ticino and Grigioni in Switzerland, besides being the second official language in the Vatican City and in some areas of Istria, Slovenia and Croatia with an Italian minority.

As for IFL in Japan, however, it appears clear that Japanese who study Italian do it basically because of an interest in Italy and its people, i.e., natives of a relatively small mother-language community and a comparatively homogeneous culture. Being so, it appears understandable why the need to avoid separating Italian *language* and *culture* is constantly stressed by theoreticians of IFL teaching methodology (see among others Balboni 2002, Mezzadri

2003, Santipolo 2002). However, although the idea of teaching *language* (i.e., linguistic competence) is one that everybody seems to understand and agree with, the ideas on how to approach *culture* often appear to be quite nebulous.

'Cross-cultural semiotic approach'

The approach to IFL teaching I would like to suggest proposes looking at language and culture as a whole from a cross-cultural semiotic viewpoint. Pedagogically, in effect, language and culture can be better understood if we realize that objects, concepts, values and behaviors that speakers talk about -- or, in case of verbal behaviors, produce -- function as such in view of the fact that they obey semiotic laws (Eco 2004: 42). Namely, objects, concepts, values and behaviors make sense when are interpreted in relation to a *code*, i.e., a system of signification that relies on an implied set of regulations and induces us to automatically associate meanings to entities (Eco 2004: 19-20). Needless to say, this assignment of meaning may differ remarkably at a cross-cultural level of interpretation/communication. In fact, the relevance people attach to what they see and experience is determined by codes which are structured in ways that are consistent with the parameters of the culture they belong to.

Below I shall exemplify two class activities the goal of which consisted in having students assign meanings to certain culture-specific entities. I propose to call these entities 'signals', intending by this term 'stimuli calling for an interpretation'.

Notice that *signals* are not to be confounded with *signs*, given that in semiotics signs are entities which already enclose meanings interpretable in line with a social convention previously accepted (Eco 2004: 27). At a cross-cultural level, it is exactly the lack of awareness of such social conventions that causes foreigners to assign divergent meanings to the entities they experience for the first time. By adopting the point of view of the foreigner, therefore, I prefer to use the term 'signals' (i.e., 'stimuli calling for an interpretation') to refer to the objects and the concepts that will be taken into account in this analysis.

Based on De Mauro (2000: 7), we can say that the interpretation of a signal can be carried out in two opposite directions:

> 1. A *RECEPTIVE semiotic process*, in which people are required to attribute a meaning to a signal that might make no sense at all to them (i.e., a signal of a foreign culture they come into contact with for the first time);
>
> 2. A *PRODUCTIVE semiotic process*, in which people produce or describe a signal which makes sense to them, but which might result in being totally obscure to the native of another language-culture.

The two examples offered below follow one pattern each. In the first instance, the direction of the interpretation goes from the foreign culture (the Italian culture in our case) to the native culture (the Japanese culture in our case); in the second instance, the course of the interpretation is the opposite.

Both examples relate to modules of Italian I have devised. By 'module' I refer to a relatively short set of units dealing

with one particular topic (cf. Mezzadri 2003: 20-22). The first example is based on a module that is still being constructed and of which, at present, I cannot fully report the results. The second example refers to a module that I have taught and for which I was able to evaluate the outcomes. This paper however does not aim to account for data in a systematic and quantitative fashion. Rather, through both examples I intend to offer some qualitative suggestions on how to teach a foreign *language* and *culture* to Japanese learners in a motivating way.

Two examples of class activities

Cross-cultural RECEPTIVE semiotic process

Any kind of visual aid on a target culture can be effectively used to activate a cross-cultural receptive semiotic process. For instance, in classes of Italian attended by Japanese first and second year university students, I have recently been using art documentaries as pedagogical material. I decided to choose art as the topic of a module of elementary Italian, after listening to several students' comments on the difficulty they had felt in trying to understand the message of sculptures and paintings admired during a study trip to Italy (notice that Italy preserves one of the largest artistic patrimonies, so it is no wonder it is a kind of 'Mecca' for arts majors from all over the world).

It is interesting to notice that any Italian who visits a church or a museum in which works of the Italian Middle Age, the Renaissance and the Baroque age are conserved knows in advance that they will see images of angels, saints and heroes from the Old Testament or the Greco-Roman world. Even though they cannot possibly know all the episodes recounted throughout the Bible or classical literature, they will be able to assign, if not a complete meaning, at least a reference to what they will be seeing. The figures portrayed in those art objects, in fact, are archetypes pertaining to the collective imagination of Italians. On the other hand, Japanese students (unless they are specialists in Western art history) can perceive the same figures as obscure signals calling for an interpretation.

To facilitate learners' assignment of meaning and reference to signals of this kind, in a second year university class, the employment of Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne*, among others art works, appeared to have interesting effects. After showing the students a 10-minute section of a documentary, in which the artistic value of Bernini's masterpiece was explained in Japanese, I froze the image on the screen with the purpose of having students carry out a second description. The easiest way to accomplish the task was by handing out a short text in Italian in which the legend of Daphne was related. Her story is very touching: in brief, she used to live peacefully in the forest, until the caprice of two gods, Eros and Apollo, devastated her existence. She can be seen as a universal symbol of peace and fragility interrupted by the invasion of an arrogant power -- a theme that has always been current in human history. Apollo tried to capture Daphne, but Gea, hearing her daughter cry for help, intervened, transforming the gracious nymph into a laurel tree.

Taking into account the level of grammatical competence reached by students at an elementary level, the text in Italian can be used to carry out an overview of grammatical topics such as the irregular plural forms of certain nouns (i.e. the parts

of the body: *braccio>braccia*, 'arm(s)'; *dito>dita,* 'finger(s)'), irregular and reflexive verbs in the present indicative, direct and indirect pronouns. New lexicon can be introduced, in particular words related to vegetation, and a few words -- not frequently used in daily life -- of mythology (i.e., *dio-dea*, 'god-goddess'; *ninfa*, 'nymph'). Based on the short reading, countless activities can be devised. The artwork, at this stage, functions as a 'container of lexicon' and as an expedient for attracting students' attention. Especially art students appear to be very sensitive to the beauty of artworks and very curious to know the story that lies behind them.

In the cross-cultural semiotic approach I am discussing here, however, the masterpiece and the text describing its story are not to be considered at the *semantic* and *grammatical* level only, but they should be expanded to the dimension of *pragmatic-knowledge* and regarded as a starting point for introducing a set of information which will enable students to gradually assign a multifaceted meaning to the object under analysis: namely, to start bridging their vision of the signal with the meaning that it was acquired in the target culture. As I mentioned above, students do not necessarily always know how to refer a signal from another culture to the network of meanings it belongs to, which in this specific case is represented by the dimension of Greco-Roman mythology. An input leading to the construction of a more satisfactory sense of *Apollo and Daphne*, for instance, can be conveyed through an additional short reading providing information on the structure of the world inhabited by the classical deities and the psychology of the ancient Greco-Roman gods and demigods who were very similar, not only in shape but also in mind, to human beings. From there, a comparative analysis can be carried out relating the Greco-Roman and the Japanese mythology (for example asking students to carry out some research as an assignment), and expanding the analysis to the Christian world and Japanese religions, in order to establish not only differences but also possible equivalences.

As a further suggestion for a comparative analysis of *Apollo and Daphne*, at higher levels, an interesting development could be the interpretation of the following piece of information appearing on the website of the Borghese Gallery:

> The presence of such a pagan fairytale in the house of the Cardinal [Scipione Broghese] was justified by a moral distich composed in Latin by cardinal Maffeo Barberini (later Pope Urban VIII) which was engraved in the scroll at the base of the statue, that says: *Those who follow the fleeting forms of amusement ultimately will grasp nothing but leaves and bitter berries.*

This way, the sculpture and the myth are placed in another cultural background: that of XVI century Rome, and precisely in Cardinal Borghese's house. The distich, re-interpreted from a Japanese point of view, can offer an example of what students would call '*tatemae*', that is, a formal justification aimed at restoring harmony when a disturbing event has been produced. Diachronically speaking, however, the distich conveys mixed feelings. Interpreted in line with the code of values that both Italian and Japanese societies acknowledge nowadays, the message is undoubtedly disturbing: we can't ignore, in fact, that Daphne is a victim of masculine arrogance.

Although, as I said, this example is still part of a work in progress, experiments carried out so far show that students are always impressed by the beauty of art masterpieces. Nevertheless, they tend to keep silent when asked to express their opinions and to interpret the signal based on what they think or feel. But this is a problem that always occurs in Japanese university classes. To help students acquire new vocabulary, the expedient of associating stories and beautiful images appears to be useful and motivating. However, from the methodological viewpoint, this kind of activity seems to have some shortcomings. In the first place the lexicon 'contained' in artworks is limited (cf. Zamborlin 2005b). Activities of this kind, therefore, can only be proposed in short sets of units. Furthermore, in order to carry out a cross-cultural comparative analysis, extensive use of Japanese is required, which can cause difficulties, considering that at Japanese universities Italian is usually learned at elementary-intermediate levels.

Cross-cultural PRODUCTIVE semiotic process

The information gradually supplied in the kind of activity described above is not only intended to offer students content notions. On the contrary, it is aimed to activate an interpretation of objects, behaviors or concepts, in line with the system of signification those signals fit in, and the network of pragmatic knowledge that students already possess and/or construct.

In an advanced level course at a cultural association, I proposed the semiotic process opposite to the cognitive route activated through the analysis of *Apollo and Daphne*. Here, as a matter of fact, I asked students to make explicit the meaning of several culture-specific ideas which are part of every Japanese speaker's pragmatic knowledge but which may be totally unintelligible to Italians. The suggestion was provided by some considerations I collected from students who work as volunteer interpreters of Italian in Hiroshima. Sometimes they have the chance to guide around the city Italian visitors who may be people visiting the city for business or academic purposes, or institutional figures such as mayors of Italian cities and diplomats. Students have often told me that the Italian guests usually ask a lot of questions that are not always 'easy answerable'. In their view, the problem is not *communicating* in Italian per se, but *explaining* in Italian aspects of the Japanese culture that they had learned unconsciously.

The module (12 lessons of 2 hours each, once a week, in a class of 12 students) was designed based on the following parameters:

1. I selected a corpus of culture-specific ideas ranging across 5 domains (i.e., household, religion, society, psychology and language).
2. The pedagogical material consisted of a set of short readings in Japanese based on Sugiura and Gillespie (1993).
3. The readings were not carried out with the aim of translating information into Italian (even though students often asked me to devote some class time to checking the translations they had made at home) but of using the Japanese texts as containers of implicit knowledge to be made explicit.

4. Students were therefore required to verbally explain in Italian the ideas under analysis and the semiotic codes those ideas referred to.

Several terms designating objects, behaviors and values, ranging from the easily translatable to the untranslatable, were analyzed and elucidated. For instance, when dealing with some interior elements of the Japanese houses, concepts with an equivalent term in Italian were found. One example can be '*tokonoma*' which does not belong to the traditional architecture of the Italian house and does not have a corresponding function in the Italian culture. However, the word can be translated into Italian by the term '*nicchia*' ('niche') which denotes an element quite close to '*tokonoma*' but refers to different architectural realities (i.e., palaces or churches).

Again in the household domain, a large number of untranslatable terms were found. Still, they did not appear to be inexplicable. An example can be the word '*seiza*' which indicates a way of sitting. This conduct does not correspond to any behavior in the Italian culture. Nevertheless it can be explained and understood as a way of sitting on a *tatami* mat, which is supposed to be observed by women and, in very formal contexts, also by men.

Several terms requiring much more complex definitions emerged. An example is the concept of '*wa*', belonging to the psychological domain, which in Italian is normally translated with the word '*armonia*' ('harmony'). The translation, though, does not convey the same deep nuances that the Japanese term encompasses. The word, in this case, does not define simply an abstract concept but quite a compound of socio-cultural values, the explanation of which motivated students to reflect on the problem in order to provide suitable accounts.

This course had a very positive outcome. Students (over the half) clearly told me that they appreciated the chances I gave them to reflect explicitly on knowledge they had always taken for granted or regarded as 'common sense'. They were all adult educated learners and therefore they were able not only to offer accurate explanations in Italian, but also to express their point of view, establishing comparisons between the two cultures. For example, one student (a housewife in her fifties) reflected deeply on a question I had posed while discussing the meaning of '*kamon*' ('family crest'). Since most of the *kamon* consist of floral emblems, I associated this detail to the relevance flowers seem to play in the Japanese culture. Therefore I asked the class why Japanese, compared to Italians, usually recognize and are able to name many varieties of flowers. The student, after one week of reflection on the matter, provided an answer that was almost on the same level as an anthropologist's. She explained that, fundamentally, the Japanese have always been farming people rather than fisherman. Traditionally they are not hunters and only recently has breeding animals acquired some economic relevance in Japan. This explains why the Japanese culture highly values the elements of vegetation. For instance, in Shinto religion trees can be regarded as deities. Moreover, from *ikebana* and *kimono*'s patterns to gastronomy and traditional sweet-making for the tea ceremony, flowers, herbs, leaves and berries of any kind play a great esthetic role and hold symbolic meanings. This is not to mention the sacredness of rice which cannot be left over in a bowl without killing one thousand Buddha per grain.

This kind of activity, however, appears to have some limits. For example, it can only be carried out in classes of highly motivated students from whom there is a clear need of communicating in Italian at an advanced level and an elevated interest in cross-cultural communication. It is also essential that student carry out research autonomously outside the class.

Conclusion

The 'cross-cultural semiotic approach' proposed here is pertinent to foreign language teaching contexts in which the distance between native language/culture and foreign language/culture is noticeably great. This approach requires that culture-specific objects, behaviors and concepts (which I subsumed under the label of 'signals') be (re)interpreted within certain networks of meanings (i.e., *semiotic codes*). Through this (re)interpretation, which I called 'semiotic process', signals that on a first sight might appear obscure or opaque gradually acquire a more enriched sense.

In the examples discussed, I focused respectively on an object of the target culture (i.e., a piece of Italian art) and a set of Japanese ideas since, according to Eco (2004: 39), even ideas can be considered as signs, and therefore as signals. The same approach, however, can apply to any kind of signal. In a course designed to enhance students' pragmatic competence, for instance, speech acts can be viewed as signals to be cross-linguistically and cross-culturally compared.

Ultimately, the construction of a new awareness, or the resurfacing of implicit knowledge one already possesses, is not aimed at transmitting or exchanging erudite notions. The cross-cultural semiotic process activated through the approach proposed here is rather intended as a way of connecting different wisdoms by bridging and sharing different ways of thinking, feeling, interacting and imagining the world.

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