Proceedings of the Edinburgh Linguistics Department Conference '96 pp. 91–101

Cultural meaning in a second-language text

Carol Y. M. Chan
chancaro@srv0.apl.ed.ac.uk

Abstract

Second-language narratives in English use the same linguistic structures as first-language texts. However, when they seek to convey non-English sensibilities and local realities, the words used are made to carry additional cultural meanings. How are such cultural meanings organised and communicated? This paper presents the theory of prototype semantics as a useful approach to understanding the relationship between language and culture in second-language texts. Prototypical meanings are highly significant because they refer the reader to specific cultural models. A second-language narrative will be discussed to demonstrate how prototypical meaning based on a specific cultural model can generate culturally significant meanings in the text.

1 Writing in a second language

Authors who choose to write in their second-language find that they cannot draw upon the resources of the second language unquestioningly to portray local realities. Edwin Thumboo, a Singaporean poet who writes in English, has described his experience in the following terms:

> Mastering it [the English language] involves holding down and breaching a body of habitual English associations to secure the condition of verbal freedom cardinal to energetic, resourceful writing. (1976:ix)

Choosing a non-native language for self-expression thus involves contending with the cultural meanings already encoded in linguistic items. In addition, the lack of language structures and meaningful associations pertaining to the speaker's cultural reality must also be overcome. This use of a non-native language in native contexts is akin to 'redefining the semantic and semiotic potential of a language, making a language mean something which is not part of its traditional 'meaning' ' (Kachru 1982:341).

The difficulties faced by the second-language writer underscore the fact that languages are social systems structured and maintained by societies, situated within particular cultural contexts. As Lyons states, self-expression through language is 'very largely controlled by socially imposed and socially recognised norms of behaviour and categorisation' (1981:144). With the spread of English as a world language, communities which do not identify with British norms tend to subvert them in order to impose their own non-English patterns of usage, giving rise to varieties, such as Indian, Australian, and Nigerian English.

The adaptation of English across cultures would not be possible without the creative quality of language. It is this quality that allows second-language speakers to generate new linguistic structures, or to adapt familiar linguistic structures for the expression of unfamiliar concepts. In the process, they achieve a form of translation which involves encoding concepts that are not part of the meaning system of a language, and hence, the possibility of cross-cultural communication.

However, the manipulation of linguistic structures does not guarantee successful cross-cultural communication. For example, Western readers may still not recognise the cultural import of certain linguistic items in a story by a Chinese author, even though the text is in English. The cultural connotations of linguistic items often depend on prototypical uses of such terms within a particular linguistic community. These prototypical uses may be carried over into the second-language text, when the second-language writer attempts to communicate some aspects of his or her native cultural reality using equivalent terms in English. In the process, he or she reorganises or extends the meanings of linguistic items, so that they can convey more or other than their habitual, *taken-for-granted* meanings.

This paper seeks to examine one of the ways by which cultural meanings are conveyed through a second-language. It will focus on the role of prototypical cultural meanings for the interpretation of second-language writing in English. The insights afforded by studies of prototype semantics will be applied to an analysis of a narrative by Maxine Hong Kingston.

2 A definition of culture

Culture is often restrictively identified with the behaviour, the rituals or ceremonies, the songs, dances, narratives, and other cultural products of individual societies. However, in this paper, we shall adopt a cognitive view of culture, as found in Holland & Quinn's succinct definition of culture as 'shared presuppositions about the world' (1987:vii). This view defines culture as knowledge, acquired through membership of a particular community. Lyons notes that cultural knowledge includes both practical and propositional knowledge and emphasises that 'as far as propositional knowledge is concerned, it is the fact that something is held to be true that counts, not its actual truth or falsity' (1981:302). Thus, when we refer to cultural meaning expressed through language, we mean a body of shared knowledge that includes factual knowledge about the world, as well as assumptions which do not correspond to reality or only in varying degrees.

3 Semantic prototypes

Recent studies of word meaning recognise the roles of culture and cognition in meaning construction. Traditionally, the study of lexical meaning or semantics attempts to determine the meaning of a lexeme in terms of sense — its relationship with other lexemes — and denotation — its relationship with the outside world. While the distinctions of sense and denotation are helpful, determining word meaning solely in these terms will be of limited value because it is based upon the assumption that the relationship between things and words is direct and uniform.

Lexical non-isomorphism emphasises the fact that words in one language tend not to have the same denotation as those in another language. For example, in Mandarin, the word *zhuo zi*[1] is used to denote either a table or a desk, and speakers would only go to the trouble of referring to the latter as *shu zhuo* if they wanted to be specific in cases of ambiguity; an English speaker, on the other hand, would habitually use two distinct labels for these objects.

The meaning of words denoting abstract concepts, such as "kinship", "beauty", and "anger", depend even more heavily upon cultural contexts since our understanding and use of such terms are rooted in socially transmitted knowledge. As Wierzbicka emphasises, 'language doesn't reflect the world directly: it reflects human conceptualization, human interpretation of the world' (1992:7). Thus, the meanings we attached to the phrase "a most beautiful woman" depend on the ways beauty is conceptualized in our culture and the associations the phrase picks up as we use it repeatedly in similar contexts. For a South Indian, it will signify a cultural ideal that differs in certain respects from Anglo-British usage of the phrase. This difference reflects the fact that, in general, lexical structures of languages are governed by 'culturally important distinctions among classes of entities' (Lyons 1981:153).

How can these cultural distinctions be analysed and described? The theory of prototype semantics provides a useful starting point. Studies by Fillmore and Lakoff demonstrate the influence of prototype semantics in our use of language. Essentially, prototype semantics views word-meaning 'as determined by a central or prototypical application' (Sweetser 1987:43).[2] By relating real-world cases to a best instance of word-usage and by highlighting the underlying role of cultural models in theories of word definition, prototype semantics recognises the crucial fact that words do not exist in a vacuum, but are grounded in the speaker's world.

3.1 Fillmore

In his analysis of the English noun 'bachelor', Fillmore (1975) argues that the traditional definition of 'bachelor' as an unmarried adult man is inadequate because it cannot explain why some unmarried men, such as the Pope, Tarzan, or a male partner in a long-term relationship, are not described as bachelors.

As an alternative, he proposes that when speakers use the word 'bachelor', they think in terms of a context with certain expectations about marriage and the marriageable age. Thus, the word 'bachelor' 'frames' (Fillmore's term) a simplified world of prototypical

[1]The Chinese characters are represented here by pinyin.

[2]The psychological reality of prototypes was first demonstrated by Rosch (1973) in her study of colour categories in Dani, a New Guinea language that has only two basic colour terms: *mili* and *mola*. Rosch discovered that when Dani speakers were asked for the best examples of *mili* and *mola*, they chose the focal colours in the range of colours designated by the colour terms. She named these focal colours cognitive reference points or prototypes.

events: men marry at a certain age and marriages last for life. In such a world, a bachelor is a man who stays unmarried beyond the usual marriageable age, and becomes eminently marriageable. As Popes, Tarzans and males in long-term unmarried couplings do not belong in such simplified worlds, they are not regarded as prototypical bachelors.

Thus, Fillmore demonstrates that conventional definitions are often related to cultural prototypes. By highlighting the role of conceptual models in language usage, Fillmore's frame semantics indicates one of the ways in which we can account for the prototypical meanings of words when used by different societies.

3.2 Lakoff

Lakoff (1987) elaborates on the function of prototypes in his theory of idealized cognitive models. Idealized cognitive models structure mental space, which are 'like possible worlds in that they can be taken as representing our understanding of hypothetical and fictional situations' (Lakoff 1987:282). The simplified world described by Fillmore to account for the prototypical case of 'bachelor' is an example of an idealized cognitive model.

In his discussion of the category defined by the lexeme 'mother', Lakoff (1987:74–76) provides an interesting example of how a cluster of converging idealized cognitive models can give rise to prototype effects. The classical definition of 'mother' is a woman who has given birth to a child. However, such a definition ignores other meanings associated with motherhood, which Lakoff describes in terms of models:

> *The genetic model*: the female who contributes the genetic material is the mother
>
> *The nurturance model*: the female adult who nurtures and raises a child is the mother
>
> *The marital model*: the wife of the father is the mother
>
> *The genealogical model*: the closest female ancestor is the mother
>
> (Lakoff 1987:74)

Lakoff demonstrates that the concept of mother involves all of these individual models, which converge to form a concept of mother which is psychologically more basic than the models taken individually. The point of convergence gives rise to the prototypical concept of 'mother'.

What is particularly relevant to our discussion is Lakoff's explanation of social stereotypes, which are important in defining cultural expectations. In his analysis of the category denoted by the linguistic label 'housewife', he observes that the housewife stereotype arises from a stereotypical view of nurturance, associated with the nurturance model of mother. According to this view, housewives are mothers who are able to provide the best care for their children because they remain at home all the time. Thus, stereotypes are examples of prototype effects.

Lakoff characterises social stereotypes in the following manner:

> Social stereotypes are cases of metonymy — where a subcategory has a socially recognized status as standing for the category as a whole, usually for the purpose of making quick judgements about people.
>
> (1987:79)

Since stereotypes have a role in characterising concepts and defining society's expectations, they affect the meaning value attached to particular linguistic labels. For example, consider the connotations attached to the noun phrase 'the working mother'. As Lakoff explains, the category denoted by 'the working mother' is not simply a mother who happens to be working; instead one of the ways it is conventionally defined is in contrast to the stereotypical housewife-mother, with the result that the working mother is negatively viewed as one who cannot provide the best care for her children because she is not at home all the time. Thus, prototypes can be defined against other prototypes.

Apart from Lakoff's description of the stereotypical meanings attached to 'the working mother' and 'the housewife', alternative meanings are also associated with such expressions: 'the working mother' may have the positive connotations of being an economic contributor or as one able to cope under difficult circumstances; 'the housewife', on the other hand, may carry the negative overtones of being a non-wage earner and a dependent. However these alternative meanings may also be perceived as instances of social stereotyping based on an economic model of the female and they emphasise the role of prototype semantics in the social manipulation of language.

3.3 Prototype theory for analysing written texts

The studies by Fillmore, Sweetser, and Lakoff focus on individual lexemes in an attempt to discover the cultural and social frameworks that explain their actual usage. They demonstrate that the meanings of these linguistic items are influenced by prototypes arising from particular cognitive models or simplified representations of situations in the social worlds of the language-user.

Second-language written texts are framed by cultural contexts that differ significantly from those of texts written by Anglo-American writers, for whom English is a first language. If, as prototype semantics suggests, word meaning is characterised by prototypicality through the influence of underlying cultural models, then one approach to discovering the culturally significant meanings in second-language texts is by examining the way prototypical meanings are encoded, evoked, and exploited. In this paper, I shall examine some of the prototypical meanings generated by a second-language text in English and its relationship to an underlying cultural model.

4 'White Tigers'

'White Tigers' comes from a collection of five narratives, entitled *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, by Maxine Hong Kingston (1976). It represents a piece of genuine second-language data as Kingston's first language is a Chinese dialect of Canton and she only acquired English as a second language in school. However, she chooses to write in English and her mastery of the language is evident in the creative manipulation of language structures in her text.

The autobiographical text recounts the author's experiences as a first-generation Chinese American. An important theme is the influence of traditional Chinese values on Kingston's perception of herself as a Chinese female child. The two ways in which the text evokes a cultural framework are by the incorporation of Chinese sayings, and by the retelling of a Chinese legend. In this paper, we shall focus our attention on the way the writer uses traditional Chinese sayings to evoke one of the prototypical meanings associated with the Chinese female child and examine how this prototypical meaning is exploited in some unusual examples of language usage in the narrative.

4.1 Transmitting culture through language

The opening sentences of 'White Tigers' highlight the focus of our analysis: some of the cultural meanings associated with the lexemes 'daughter' and 'girl' in the text.

> When we Chinese girls listened to the adults talking-story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves. We could be heroines, swordswomen. (Kingston 1976:19)

Here, Kingston refers to the popular Chinese pastime of storytelling, which not only entertains its listeners but communicates and promotes cultural values. The stories and legends of ancient China recounted by the Chinese in America thus played a crucial role in defining cultural expectations for Kingston. Taking note of Quinn & Holland's observation that cultural knowledge is 'learned from others, in large part from their talk' (1987:22), our analysis begins by examining the Chinese sayings recorded in 'White Tigers' as examples of language functioning as cultural instruction in the text.

4.2 Analysis of Chinese sayings in the text

Analysing the Chinese sayings in terms of illocutionary acts and perlocutionary effects associated with utterances (Austin 1962) reveals some of their pragmatic functions. The two Chinese sayings in the following passage are quoted by a corrupt man to justify his exploitation of females:

> "Oh, come now. Everyone takes the girls when he can. The families are glad to be rid of them. '*Girls are maggots in the rice.*' '*It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters.*'" He quoted me the sayings I hated.
> (Kingston 1976:43. Emphasis mine.)

The illocutionary force of the sayings is directed towards justification and agreement, and relies upon the assumption and acknowledgement of their status as pieces of cultural wisdom. However, their perlocutionary effect is to anger the listener.

The next passage from 'White Tigers' presents three Chinese sayings:

> When one of my parents or the emigrant villagers said, "*Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds*," I would thrash on the floor and scream so hard I couldn't talk. I couldn't stop.
>
> "What's the matter with her?"
>
> "I don't know. Bad I guess. You know how girls are. '*There's no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls.*'"
>
> "I would hit her if she were mine. But then there's no use wasting all that discipline on a girl. '*When you raise girls, you're raising children for strangers.*'" (Kingston 1976:46. Emphasis mine.)

The sayings quoted by the emigrant villagers and Kingston's mother have several perlocutionary effects: Kingston is upset by them, which, as a child, she demonstrates by throwing a tantrum; however, their effect on the villagers is to evoke tacit consent and encourage other similar thoughts. Thus, in contrast to the sayings in the previous passage, the illocutionary force of the sayings in this passage succeeds when directed towards a specific audience — the emigrant villagers — since they refer the listeners to common knowledge as a basis for understanding behaviour and justifying action, or, in this case, the absence of action.

Common sayings assume a body of cultural knowledge shared by speakers. Thus, in above passage, the saying 'There's no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls' is preceded by the sentence 'You know how girls are', a phrase which not only emphasizes shared knowledge but also the taken-for-grantedness of the meaning expressed in the sayings. In the next two passages, the sayings once again serve as reference points of common knowledge, which is then used to facilitate reasoning and understanding.

> It was said, "*There is an outward tendency in females*," which meant that I was getting straight A's for the good of my future husband's family, not my own. (Kingston 1976:47. Emphasis mine.)

> They only say, "*When fishing for treasures in the flood, be careful not to pull in girls*," because that is what one says about daughters. But I watched such words come out of my own mother's and father's mouths; I looked at their ink drawing of poor people snagging their neighbor's flotage with long flood hooks and pushing the girl babies on down the river. And I had to get out of hating range. (Kingston 1976:52. Emphasis mine.)

The presence of the generic nouns, 'females' and 'girls', as well as the existential 'there', help to raise these sayings to the status of gnomic utterances and collective wisdom. However, close analysis reveals that they convey not proven truths but certain cultural notions about female children. The latter passage indicates that the imagery of one such saying even assumed concrete visual representation in a pen and ink drawing, perhaps as a means of making its meaning explicit and more memorable; the drawing clearly made an indelible impression on Kingston.

4.3 A prototypical meaning

Taken together, these sayings build up a picture of how daughters are regarded in Chinese culture, thereby suggesting one cultural framework against which the words 'girl' and 'daughter' are prototypically defined. This cultural framework becomes obvious when the sayings are listed together:

1. Girls are maggots in the rice.
2. It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters.
3. There's no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls.
4. Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds.
5. When you raise girls, you're raising children for strangers.
6. There is an outward tendency in females.
7. When fishing for treasures in the flood, be careful not to pull in girls.

Repeatedly, the female child is described negatively: the words 'girls', 'daughters' and 'females' are associated with 'maggots', 'no profit', 'cowbirds', 'strangers', and 'outward tendencies'. Even when we are unsure of the exact meaning of some of the sayings, the contexts surrounding them confirm the fact that they are not meant to be regarded as compliments to daughters, as the above analysis of their pragmatic functions reveals (see Section 4.2). Instead, they generate prototype effects in the text by repeatedly emphasising a negative view of daughters as worthless, bringing little or no benefit to their families. This view is closely linked to the notion of economic gain and practical value. Thus, a female child is stereotypically perceived in terms of her *lack* of worth or tangible contribution to her own family.

The traditional prejudices surrounding female children in traditional Chinese culture are well-documented (Hsu 1949, 1981; Lee 1960; Tu 1985; Kristeva 1986; Tsai 1986). According to feudal and Confucian customs, only sons continue the family name and inherit family property. A daughter, on the other hand, is expected to marry *into* another family; any contributions she makes will be to her husband's family and her sons will bear the father's surname. It also follows from this that raising daughters is a waste of limited resources. In contrast, a son is highly valued and socially significant. The prototypical meaning of 'daughter' that Kingston generates in her text is based on this stereotypical view of the female child that arises from such a cultural framework.

4.4 Culture and language play

The prototypical definition of a Chinese female child as intrinsically worthless helps to explain the unusual choice of words in the last sentence of the following passage:

> "Stop that crying!" my mother would yell. "I'm going to hit you if you don't stop. Bad girl! Stop!"...
>
> "I'm not a bad girl," I would scream. "I'm not a bad girl." *I might as well have said, "I'm not a girl."* (Kingston 1976:46. Emphasis mine.)

The phrase 'bad girl' is usually interpreted to mean naughty, but 'bad' could also be used to describe a useless person. It is this second meaning of 'bad' that the narrator refers to when she wryly concludes that to deny the label 'bad girl' is tantamount to denying her identity as a female. Within a cultural framework that regards a female child as intrinsically worthless, the adjective 'bad' becomes redundant in collocation with the noun 'girl'. Consequently, one can only deny that one is not a bad girl when one is not a girl, that is, a boy.

The word-play in the following passage is also possible because of cultural framework against which the noun 'girl' is defined:

> "Bad girl," my mother yelled, and sometimes that made me gloat rather than cry. *Isn't a bad girl almost a boy*?
>
> (Kingston 1976:47. Emphasis mine.)

Here, the narrator draws on another meaning of the adjective 'bad', as used in the sentence: He was a *bad* actor. Thus, she interprets the reproof 'bad girl' to mean her lack of the defining characteristics of the female child. If 'girl' is prototypically defined as worthless, the negation of this chief quality is to elevate her status to that of the valued child, that is, a boy. By reordering the semantics of 'bad girl', the narrator reinterprets a reproof as a positive redefinition of her identity.

These two passages demonstrate that the words 'girl' and 'boy' are not simply regarded as antonyms according to sexual characteristics but, more importantly, they are defined in relation to the cultural values placed upon them. In contrast to the prototypical definition of the female child as worthless, the male child is regarded favourably and as of great value to the family. In this narrative, these cultural meanings assume great significance, with an emphasis on the negative connotations of the lexeme 'girl'.

5 Conclusion

If we only relied on dictionary definitions of the lexemes 'girl' and 'daughter', we would lose their cultural import in 'White Tigers'. Understandably, dictionaries tend to restrict themselves to basic definitions of daughter in terms of the relationship between parent and female child. However, as Lyons points out:

> ...many of the concepts with which we operate are culture-bound, in the sense that they depend for their understanding upon socially transmitted knowledge, both practical and propositional, and vary considerably from culture to culture. (1981:308)

Thus, we need to go beyond the dictionary definition to account for the cultural status (or lack of it) denoted by the nouns 'girl' or 'daughter'. Kingston's text encourages us to locate their meanings within a cultural matrix, to interpret their significance through the model of traditional Chinese expectations evoked by the traditional sayings, which may or may not correspond to reality but certainly represent a strong cultural influence.

This example of a second-language text suggests that when a writer successfully communicates his or her native reality, he or she may do so by drawing on specific cultural models to contribute the cultural connotations of words and linguistic structures. Part of the successful communication of such meanings depends on how the writer provides access to the cultural framework. In 'White Tigers', this is effected through the insertion of cultural sayings, which serve as sources of cultural assumptions.

The theory of semantic prototypes, by drawing attention to the models underlying the meanings of words, reminds us that we need to look beyond dictionary definitions to the way different cultures apply linguistic labels in describing reality. It also suggests that semantic prototypes are some of the forms that cultural meanings may take. Although such a theory represents only one approach to understanding the relationship between language and culture, its insights are crucial if we are to look beneath the surface of the text.

References

Austin, J. 1962. *How to Do Things with Words*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Fillmore, C. 1975. An alternative to checklist theories of meaning. In *Proceedings of the First Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society*. Berkeley: Berkeley Linguistics Society, pp.123–131.

Holland, D. & N. Quinn (eds). 1987. *Cultural Models in Language and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hsu, F. 1949. *Under the Ancestors' Shadow: Chinese Culture and Personality*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

——. 1981. *Americans and Chinese: Passage to Differences*. Third Edition. Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii.

Kachru, B. 1982. Meaning in deviation: toward understanding non-native English texts. In B. Kachru (ed). 1982. *The Other Tongue*. Oxford: Pergamon Press, pp.325–350.

Kristeva, J. 1986. *About Chinese Women*. Trans. A. Barrows. New York: Marion Boyars.

Lakoff, G. 1987. *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Lee, R. 1960. *The Chinese in the United States of America*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Lyons, J. 1981. *Language and Linguistics: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Quinn, N. & D. Holland. 1987. Culture and cognition. In Holland and Quinn (eds). 1987, pp.3–42.

Rosch, E. 1973. Natural categories. *Cognitive Psychology* 4: 328–350.

Sweetser, E. 1987. The definition of lie: an examination of the folk models underlying a semantic prototype. In Holland & Quinn (eds). 1987, pp.43–66.

Tsai, S. 1986. *The Chinese Experience in America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Thumboo, E. 1976. Introduction. In E. Thumboo (ed). *The Second Tongue: An Anthology of Poetry from Malaysia and Singapore*. Singapore: Heinemann Educational Books (Asia), pp.vii–xxxviii.

Tu, W. 1985. Selfhood and otherness in Confucian thought. In A. Marsella, G. DeVos and F. Hsu (eds). 1985. *Culture and Self: Asian and Western Perspectives*. New York: Tavistock Publications, pp.231–251.

Wierzbicka, A. 1992. *Semantics, Culture, and Cognition: Universal Human Concepts in Culture-Specific Configurations*. New York: Oxford University Press.

The texts analysed in this paper are drawn from:

Kingston, M. 1976. White Tigers. In *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. London: Allen Lane, pp.19–53.