

F1 Beaumaris Lounge Wednesday 5 December 16.45 -17.15

Semantic levity: a requirement for learners and teachers in higher education?(0167)

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Here I introduce the notion of semantic levity, by extending Maton's work on semantic waves. Acknowledging the need for systematic integration of knowledge, I suggest that there is also a value in open-ended exploration of incompatible ways of knowing.

University teaching can be understood as the process of drawing students into disciplinary discourse (Northedge, 2003). Academic discourse tends to be abstract and semantically dense, whereas everyday communication is usually contextualised and semantically simple. Maton (2013) provides us with the example of the word "gold" used in academic and non-academic communications. In the following conversational exchange, 'gold' is context-dependent and refers to a few simple meanings: a yellowish, soft metal.

A: I like those ear-rings.

B: Which ones?

A: The gold ones over there.

In Maton's terms, this use of the word gold has strong semantic gravity and low semantic density.

By contrast, when a chemist refers to gold in a scientific paper, s/he is concerned not with a specific item that is in view at a particular moment, but to the idea of gold, in all circumstances, and for all time. For fellow chemists, the word is packed with meaning and plugged in to a structured system of knowledge.

"within the discipline of Chemistry the term may additionally signify such meanings as an atomic number, atomic weight, electron configuration, lattice structure, a capacity for reflecting infrared radiation and for conducting electricity and heat, and much more. Many of these meanings involve compositional structures, taxonomic structures or explanatory processes; for example, its atomic number represents the number of protons found in the nucleus of an atom, identifies it as a chemical element, and is situated, inter alia, within the periodic table, among many other relations. Thus, in Chemistry 'gold' is relationally situated within structured, complex, and evolving webs of meanings discourse (Maton, 2013 : 12).

Here we see weak semantic gravity and high semantic density.

Turning to an example from the humanities, a literary scholar might refer in their lecture to the "golden age of Spanish drama." Again, this academic communication is characterised by weak semantic gravity. Although limited in time and geography, the epithet golden is not referring to a particular text or performance but to an abstract idea of a time of prolific creativity. Similarly, it is characterised by high semantic

density. To the initiated, the epithet golden will connect to familiar dates (1590-1681) to knowledge of a range of genres (comedy, tragedy, opera) and identification of common themes, such as honour. Some of the meanings will be contested: there may be debates about whether the golden age started earlier or finished later, whether opera should be excluded, or if the theme of honour should be de-emphasised.

Maton shows how effective teachers help students to move up and down in semantic waves, between meanings that are condensed and abstract and those that are simple and contextualised. This facilitates cumulative learning, in which different areas of skills and knowledge are integrated, so that students are able to transfer their learning from one context to another. This focus on the systematising, consolidating dimension of university learning is valuable, but it neglects the learner's additional needs for open-ended exploration, playfulness and the creative disruption of knowledge structures. Here I shift the focus from density and gravity to introduce a new concept. Semantic levity is that disposition seen in both teachers and students who are able to keep in play a wide range of contexts and meanings when encountering and explaining new ideas and experiences.

The metaphor of a word packed with meanings perhaps becomes less useful here. Words do not straightforwardly contain or exclude meanings. They come to us with etymological connections to previous times and different contexts, and trailing long strings of connotations. These connotations may be idiosyncratic (my grandad's gold tooth), common to a particular community (a favourite Spandau Ballet' album) or more widely shared (authenticity, value and success.) Each time we choose or respond to a word, we reactivate some connections and deactivate others. "Gold" may recall for you your Grandad's tooth or your favourite Spandau Ballet album. For most of us, it's likely to bring to mind connotations of value, authenticity or success. It's possible that any or all of these meanings of gold may have no relevance whatsoever to the chemistry paper or the literature lecture. However, openness to the possibility that they *might* be relevant, along with good judgement about whether to recall them or forget them is, I would argue, a valuable dimension of semantic levity.

So, by semantic levity I mean a certain lightness of academic step, an ability to move between meanings and contexts with a view to exploring all the facets of a particular idea. I chose the term carefully: I believe it suggests the playfulness of the concept while hinting at its own critique. After all, to treat something with too much levity is to overlook its seriousness. In contrast, Maton's choice of "gravity" to indicate the degree of context-dependence in an utterance is less successful. Although it makes perfect sense to present context-dependent communication as "down-to-earth" and subject to gravity in comparison with abstract conceptualisations, nevertheless, the more usual meaning of seriousness (particularly in an academic context) interferes with understanding. I have to draw on my own semantic levity to stay aware of this metaphorical tripping hazard when I present the concept to students and colleagues.

I propose that we help university teachers to develop their semantic levity by encouraging them to read and interpret literary texts, and to engage with non-literary texts using literary methods and sensibilities. The plainest policy statement or academic paper can be read and understood as if it were the richest piece of poetry and a poem can shed clear light on learning and teaching.

During the presentation, I plan to follow a conceptual introduction with a short experiential session, allowing participants to judge for themselves the potential value of semantic levity and its contribution to academic development.

References

Maton, K. (2013) Making semantic waves: A key to cumulative knowledge-building. *Linguistics and Education*, Volume 24, Issue 1, April 2013, Pages 8–22.

Northedge, A. (2003) Rethinking Teaching in the Context of Diversity, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 8:1, 17-32