

## Teaching the Language of Journalism and Advertising and a New Approach to Literary Text Analysis within an Interdisciplinary Framework.

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I had the pleasure and honour to deliver three different lectures at the Maribor Summer School. Two of them were on ESP, namely “The Language of Advertising” and “The Language of Journalism,” and a third one was on American literature, which I based on an article of mine, entitled “Italian American Women Through the Looking-Glass of Literature: The Long and Winding Road Leading to a Cultural and Social Identity”.

I knew there would be no problems with literature because the students who attended the summer school were familiar with literature and literary text analysis, while advertising and journalism were virtually new areas of study to the majority of them. In addition, their varied cultural and religious backgrounds could have turned out to be a bit of a problem, hindering the immediate interpretation of slogans which at times can be seen as “offensive”, or at least inappropriate, as may be the case with those advertisements involving sexual double meanings or showing nudity. Fortunately, such an incident did not occur.

My first lecture dealt with the language of advertising, which I introduced as an art in its own right, demanding a solid linguistic and cultural background. So I said that, however surprising it may sound, advertising has a long history. In fact, one of the earliest ads that we know of appeared as a supplement in the *London Gazette* in 1666 and, from then onwards, the business grew so much that by 1758 Dr. Johnson wrote about advertisements’ “magnificence of promise and ... eloquence sometimes sublime and sometimes pathetic” (*The Idler*). Following this preliminary point, meant to put the students in the picture, I got down to business immediately, showing them a Power Point presentation of a wide range of advertisements. After I had given them the lead, their interest and curiosity soon took over, and you could hear them discussing the interrelation between language, image and layout, as well as the discourse between reader and advertisement that is used by advertisers to convince us to buy even what we do not need. I could tell they were intrigued to learn the ins and outs of the language of advertising, the “tricks” as they called them. Among the language devices I introduced, they particularly liked those which have a cultural implication of some sort, such as “Don’t book it. Thomas Cook it”, “Get *Time* ahead of time”, both of which rely on the reader’s knowledge of who and what Thomas Cook and *Time* are, respectively. It was also good to see that, on analyzing the slogans at a linguistic level, they indicated rhyme, repetition and alliteration as the devices used to attract the readers’ attention and help them memorize what they saw.

Then we passed to the language of journalism. The first issue I introduced was about headlines. I helped the students to realize by themselves that these share various features with slogans and have a similar function, needing to be eye-catching and as telling as possible. In fact, that can be achieved through certain language devices, which are partly shared with slogans, such as play on words, cultural references, alliteration (“Paris probe proves palace innocent”), emphatic language (“Weeping mum damns teenage killer thug”), and so on. Of course, quality effective headlines cannot be created unless you are really into the linguistic mechanisms of what I like to call the code (the language itself with all its rules). Then it was good to see the students appreciating the thread that links the language of journalism, literature and culture. For example, “European Union: to be or not to be?” clearly recalls William Shakespeare’s tragedy *Hamlet*. Instances like that allowed me to underline that top newspapers employ specialists to take care of headlines, this being a profession per se requiring particular experience and ability.

As for the literature class, it was self-evident they were more familiar with textual analysis. What was new, though, was the discovery of a branch of American literature, the Italo-American, which is not widely known outside the United States. I focused attention on a particularly interesting theme: the silent role played by Italian American women writers in the USA. Inevitably such a fiery and involving theme led me to touch on the equally silent role of common women and immigration. This got everybody involved, thus making the issue emerge as a topical one and common to the whole of Eastern Europe, and in some cases involving even personal or family experiences (note also that most of these students were young women). Another good feature was that, through the reading of a couple of passages from a relevant story of the early 1900s, “The Flapper” by Caterina Avella, and a contemporary novel such as Helen Barolini’s *Umbertina* (2002), they could compare Italian women’s change of position within a century, yet recognize that there is still a long way to go. The silence remains, though literature can be a guide and a means to understand the world where we live.

In concluding, I ask myself what I have I learnt? First of all, this teaching experience confirmed what I’ve known throughout my long teaching experience: students are prepared to learn anything as long as we manage to get them involved, which depends as usual on what is taught and how. Moreover, it seemed obvious that the active-learning approach I adopted is the only possible one to apply to teaching in general but to ESP in particular, giving a great deal of satisfaction and good results to teachers and students alike. After all, students naturally need to feel they are improving and are in good hands, which surely makes their self-confidence grow. However, I believe that things can be bettered, provided that we offer students only a few well focused “courses” where they can explore issues in greater depth and gain knowledge that will last and have an influence on their overall linguistic and cultural preparation. This provided the rationale for offering them hands-on practical experience of textual analysis focused on the two ESP areas mentioned as well as literature. Perhaps an alternative could be to provide the students with the relevant material in advance, so that they could become familiar with it without needing to do any in-depth work. But to say it in a Wildean manner: one should always leave room for perfection. All in all, it was fun, thanks also to the good quality of the students who attended the classes.