

READING BETWEEN THE LINES

—ANALYSIS AND APPRECIATION

字里行间 —— 英语短文分析与欣赏

■ 林景鸿 著

厦门大学出版社

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Preface

Preface

Liu Yameng(刘亚猛)

Reading in general, as all experienced readers can attest to, could be a tricky, paradoxical and, indeed, risky business. Reading English as a foreign language is doubly so.

It is tricky, even treacherous, in large part because meaning is not something that resides in language or text waiting to be “discovered” and “retrieved”. The process whereby the meaning of a text is *generated* is much more complicated than we tend to assume, so much so that nothing in the act of reading is, for all practical purposes, fixed. That is probably why no one has been able to come up with an “algorithm of reading” so far, one that would apply to all kinds of reading situations and, if only the reader had followed the procedure it prescribed, consistently produce the result of what may be called a “total comprehension” or “correct interpretation”. That is also why no reading public within whatever language system can agree on a specific set of criteria by which to measure the success or failure of reading.

The paradoxical nature of reading manifests itself everywhere. The more we delve into a book or even a good essay, for exemplars, the less certain we feel about what it “actually” signifies. The better readers we become, the more hesitant we grow in making definitive pronouncements on what we have read. The greater number of questions we are able to ask about a text, the greater the skills we have developed in analyzing it.

And not unlike playing the stock market, the efforts and time we have “invested” in improving our reading proficiency do not always guarantee a proportional or even reasonable “yield”. Despite the great importance we Chinese have been attaching to the betterment of our reading in English over the past decades, and a surge in availability of what pur-

port to be the ultimate guides, models or theories of English reading, anecdotal evidence suggests that mechanical “information retrieval”, superficial analysis, uninformed interpretation, or even an utter “black-out” of the mind in the face of any truly challenging text is still the order of the day when it comes to the general readers’ *actual* performance in *real-life* reading situations. The ratio between input and output, cost and benefit, outlay and profit, is so incredibly high here as to make reading English one of the riskiest “businesses” in the domain of our intellectual pursuits.

To call attention to the risks involved in this endeavor, especially to those pitfalls, snags and vortexes likely to lie in wait for student readers, is not to discourage them from redoubling their efforts to gain maturity and sophistication as readers. Rather, it is to add a sense of urgency to their need to reflect more deeply on what reading is all about. Reading, for instance, can never be taken for a mere technique. It is rather an intellectual, social, cultural or even intercultural practice all at once. Proficiency in reading is not derivable from a finite body of knowledge which we can learn and master explicitly. It is *acquired* through our sustained and persistent engagement with texts. No instruction in reading, however good it may be, will be able to offer nostrums, secret formulae, cure-alls, etc. that could miraculously lift the students to a high level of competence in reading. Once we have embraced assumptions such as the above-mentioned, and become cognizant of their implications for learning and teaching reading, it will be time to try something new: to introduce a more sophisticated theoretical framework, for instance, or to adopt an innovative approach that promises to make a difference in what we have been doing, as Professor Lin Jinghong has done with the timely publication of his book *Reading Between the Lines*.

Unlike the run-of-mill stuff for similar purposes, *Reading Between the Lines* shuns many of the must-have topics in a conventional treatment of the subject (e. g., skimming, scanning, identifying key words and topic sentences). Instead, it zeros in on what differentiates an uninitiat-



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ed reader from a competent one and hence that which holds the key to true sophistication in reading, i. e. , the ability to penetrate the textual surface, to go beyond the obvious, and to *reconstruct* the implicated meaning *with justification*. Since an inability to “read between the lines” of native texts has long been a major bottleneck in Chinese students’ learning of English, by focusing on this topic, Professor Lin directs our attention to what doubles as the most crucial and the weakest link in the “chain” of English reading and learning in general.

The format of the book renders abundantly clear another of its welcome innovations. Rather than adopting the authoritative tone of a “law-giver” in this field, dictating as inviolable rules generalization after generalization on the “what” and the “how” of reading, Professor Lin is content with playing the humbler and arguably more effective role as a *challenger* and a *facilitator*. The task he sets for himself is as simple as it is productive: to challenge his readers to develop their own proficiency through serious personal attempts to read between the lines. To this end, he sets up all the needed “scaffolds” and creates the best possible conditions for his readers to “do it themselves”. For example, he selects some of the most engaging, interesting and compact reading materials, whose “bite size” encourages and expedites close, deep, thorough, and thoughtful reading. The all-important “Appreciation and Discussion” sections throughout the book are consistently structured in such a manner as to suggest to the readers, in a tone that is the most unobtrusive imaginable, “How about trying to approach the text this way? Here are the reasons for the interpretation I am proposing.” Even in the framing “Introduction” to each chapter, the author refrains from launching a heavy-handed, jargon-filled treatise on how to process written texts, and proceeds instead to provide just enough theoretical insights for handling the task of helping the readers to draw from *their own* practices and experiences in reading.

Well-versed as he is in contemporary linguistic and reading theories, Professor Lin resists the temptation to turn his book into an overtly

and overly theory-intensive discussion on implied meanings in a text. As a senior teacher-cum-scholar in the profession of foreign language teaching and research, he has been concerned about a widening gap between the accessible and practically oriented kind of theoretical guidance, which today's teachers and students of English need badly, and the kind of theorization at a very high level of abstraction which scholarly journals and presses are turning out in volumes. The growing bifurcation between pedagogical imperatives and theoretical interests in foreign language pedagogy and studies in China worries him a lot, and with the methodological choice he has made in writing the book, he shows that one does not have to make a choice between the two. In a discussion that is *informed* rather than *showy* theoretically, as he has offered in the book, they could be seamlessly and fruitfully reunited. Many more theoretical insights than those he refers to explicitly have gone into the design and the making of this book. It is up to those of us with a "vested interest" in "theory stuff" to ferret them out, through none other means than, why, "reading between the lines".

A useful book for all serious students, professional teachers, and pedagogical specialists of English alike, a valuable contribution to scholarly inquiries into reading and interpretation as a significant theoretical subject, and a pleasure to read, *Reading Between the Lines* would reward all of us who have the good sense to take it up and start perusing it.

Introduction

“A language teacher should mould young minds, stretch their imaginations, introduce them into the exciting world of words, make the English language come alive for them.”

The above principle of language teaching is upheld and affirmed by Mrs. LouAnne Johnson, a successful American woman teacher in her autobiography *My Posse Don't Do Homework*, which I read a couple of years ago. It set me thinking quite a lot and has brought me home the fundamental question—what do we teach? Are we language teachers or language knowledge teachers? Whereas we are qualified language knowledge teachers because our students have already proved the fact with their satisfactory scores in all kinds of written examinations, we are not all successful language teachers because there is a wide gap between our students' language competence and their language performances. And as far as language teachers are concerned, there remains indeed much to be desired in our way of teaching the target language.

We know of course teaching a foreign language is different from teaching one's mother tongue, but we do believe there are lots of things in common between the two, at least the goal is the same—to enable the students to use the language. Moulding young minds is a complicated, hard piece of work, which involves several aspects, but so far as language learning is concerned, there is at least one thing we can do or should do—to get our students properly motivated, instead of making them exam-stricken, and to foster in our students a better way or an integrated way to master the target language. Getting the students more involved in what they read or letting them arrive at their own conclusions or make inferences themselves, instead of only presenting possible choices for them to choose from, is perhaps a better idea of giving them the opportunities to use their own heads, to develop their intelligence and

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stretch their imaginations, which is indispensable in language learning. Focusing on sentence patterns, language points and the related grammar in a text, the chronic common practice in our key course of intensive reading, is indeed necessary at some stage of learning, but doing that for the students who have learned the language for more than ten years is not as rewarding as it should be. Making the language come alive and introducing the students into the exciting world of words is, I think, how the language should be taught after they have learned the basic rules of it. It is, unfortunately, also what is sorely lacking in our classroom.

Reading between the lines, as this common expression clearly suggests, is to find the meanings hidden underneath the surface of the text, or to understand the meanings which the writer does not state directly. When writers make their points indirectly or in a roundabout way, or when they mean more than what they say, the reader has to work out what they merely hint at, indicate through association, or convey contextually. Being unable to “read between the lines” is a major problem in the students’ reading comprehension and appreciation. In part because of the emphasis being laid on fast reading, and the routine use of the true /false or multiple choices test pattern, our students have developed an unhealthy tendency to dwell on the surface of any text and a dubious ability to guess at the right choice from the provided ones. As a result, many of them have shown an alarming insensitivity to what is being suggested, hinted at, and implied between the lines. What should be taught in reading, so far as a language teacher is concerned, is not just comprehension, but appreciation or deep-level understanding as well, not just utility, but the development of interest, passion and imagination for further reading and study. It is in response to this urgent need that I undertook to write *Reading Between the Lines*, a book designed to help readers develop the awareness of the language in use or the ability to read, to be more exact, between the lines.

The book consists of about eighty carefully selected short stories, grouped into four functional parts in accordance with four distinctive pur-

Introduction

poses which reading between the lines is meant to serve. The text of each story is followed by five regular sections of reading aids: Notes, Think It Over or A Point to Ponder, Contextual Clues, Analysis and Appreciation, as well as a Chinese translation of the story. Of these the "Contextual Clues" and the "Analysis and Appreciation" are the two most important sections. We direct the readers' attention to the context of each story simply because "no context, no text", that is, without a context, there could be no generation of meanings whatsoever, whether explicit or implicit. We lay emphasis on a proper analysis and appreciation of each story so as to show readers the way to interpret it deeply and to make the most out of it, and to encourage them to think actively and to express their own ideas freely in the target language as well.

The stories in *Reading Between the Lines* are all written by authors from the Great Britain and the United States. Some of them are humorous, others philosophical, still others are dramatic. All of these stories, however, demand that readers involve themselves actively in capturing the native speakers' sense of humour, in identifying the conversational implicatures, in responding to the contextual clues, and in challenging themselves to find reasonable conclusions with which to complete the stories in Part IV. In addition to showing readers how to deploy conventional reading skills in their efforts to find out what is implied, we mainly offer tips, in our analysis of the stories on how attempts to uncover concealed meanings could benefit from new theoretical insights, such as those provided by pragmatics.

The book could be used as a textbook for extensive reading course or as supplementary reading materials for college students or senior high school students. The author sincerely hopes that with its very special design, *Reading Between the Lines* might help to place readers in a better position for understanding the stories, appreciating the full charm of the target language, enhancing their own awareness of the source culture, and involving themselves further more in the exciting world of words.

My friend Professor Liu Yameng of Fujian Normal University kindly

went over the manuscript and offered many useful suggestions for its improvement. I wish to extend my sincere thanks to him for the support he has so generously offered.

I would also like to thank my colleagues, professor Gao Dengliang, Zhong Kunmao, Chen Liying and Chen Weihong, who read the draft and helped to proofread the book. And I wish to thank Mr. Guo Guoshi for his help in photocopying the various drafts of the manuscript.

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Part I . Read Between the Lines for Conversational Implicatures

Introduction: The Cooperative Principle, Maxims, and Conversational Implicatures

In everyday life, when we talk we generally have something like an unwritten agreement or the cooperative principle in our mind to guide us—saying things which are true, relevant, as well as informative enough, and in a clear manner. But we also know people do not do that all the time or even in some circumstances seemingly violate it on purpose. If there are clear signs that the unwritten agreement is not followed, one will try to find out the reason. And it is usually the case that there is some additional conveyed meaning between the lines or a conversational implicature intended.

Conversational implicatures are primary examples of more being communicated than is said, but in order for them to be interpreted, some basic cooperative principle must be assumed to be in operation. Herbert Paul Grice, an Oxford philosopher, put forward the cooperative principle, or CP for short, and to specify it further, he introduced four categories of maxims as follows:

Quantity Maxim

1. Make your contribution (what you say) as informative (providing enough facts or ideas) as is required.
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required (providing too much information).

Quality Maxim

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.

2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate (enough) evidence.

Relation Maxim

Be relevant (related to what has been said before).

Manner Maxim

1. Avoid obscurity of expression (hard to understand or not clear expression).

2. Avoid ambiguity.

3. Be brief.

4. Be orderly.

The fact that speakers or writers try to convey hidden meanings and hearers or readers are able to understand them suggests that the meanings are inferential. They can be worked out on the basis of the following:

- (1) the conventional meaning of the words used, together with the identity of any references that may be involved;

- (2) the verbal context, the situational context and the cultural context;

- (3) the CP and its maxims;

- (4) the interaction between the text and the reader