

Eggins Reading Response

The process of using language is a semiotic process, a process of making meanings by choosing

In this reading response, I will attempt to elaborate on this claim, to show how I personally make meanings by choosing in my writings and conversations. My definition of language being semiotic is that part of the meaning of a sentence is influenced by the pool of alternative words that could have been used. Alternatively, the word chosen was the best word there is; any similar words contain meanings or connotations I do not wish to express. Consider this example:

Q: Did you do the dishes?

A: If you're asking if I left the dishes in the sink, the answer is no.

Your instinctive thought is probably that the one who responded had not done the dishes yet. This is because we are all aware a simple "no" would suffice. The fact that a longer roundabout answer was used simply showcases how the responder could not have said no, perhaps because they have yet to do the dishes.

We will start with an engineering context. For reports and sometimes even casual conversation, I would use precise engineering terms to describe what I mean. First, I will start by using scientific or technical terms instead of conventional terms, such as "velocity" instead of "speed", "directory" instead of "folder", and so on. The most obvious reason is that the common terms are not as well defined, and it is convenient to use an accurate term instead to avoid confusion. Secondly, I believe it sets the tone of the writing. When I am using scientific language, it hints that I am specific about the language I use, and the instructions are meant to be directly followed. Consider these two sentences.

"Add a teaspoon of salt."

"Add 5ml of sodium chloride"

Although both mean the same thing, the former suggests that anything about a teaspoon is fine, and one can probably use table salt or sea salt. Conversely, the latter suggests that sodium chloride is used, not just any chemical we conventionally call salt, and that the amount added has to be mathematically close to 5ml. By choosing to use scientific terms, I introduce these meanings to what I am writing.

Other than expressing the need for preciseness, the use of engineering terms also sets up the context and tone. When I ask my partner for water during a lab, the meaning may be ambiguous, as my partner may interpret it as me asking them to fill up my water bottle, for example, or me asking them to collect water required for the experiment. If I ask for "around 50ml of water", what I am referring to becomes clear. In casual conversations, especially when dealing with technical problems, it may be hard to deduce if someone is looking for a

solution, or if they are just looking to vent. When a friend complains their lights are broken again, I would probably assume it is just to vent and express their frustration. However, if they followed that complaint with a model number, they are probably looking for solutions. A lot of things we talk about are more or less related to engineering, so the language used is important in hinting what the purpose of the conversation is. This would also affect the tone, as someone looking for a solution to a problem may not be frustrated, but someone venting about it definitely is.

Word choice also provides valuable information about the tone. When talking to friends, it is always useful to know how casual or serious the talk is. When it is really casual, I would throw in slang or short forms such as “prolly”, “cringe”, “smh” to signify there is nothing serious going on. For more in depth conversation, I would avoid such words, as I do not wish to appear disrespectful. Again, even the choice **not** to use these words tells my audience a bit about tone or the nature of the conversation. Despite that, I would use terms such as “I guess” and “like” to show what I say is not meant to be taken as serious advice. Of course, if I were to avoid these terms and speak more formally, others can use this to pick up the hidden meaning that I am serious about what I am talking about.

The choice of language can also attach meaning to the same phrase. For me and my family members, we usually type in English for business, which ranges from booking flight tickets to preparing documents for an application. Otherwise, we prefer Chinese. Although this is a choice between different languages and not between different words of the same language, I am essentially choosing one word over another, which makes meaning. If I received a text message saying “we need to talk”, a message in English would suggest there are administrative items to deal with, such as expired documents, while a message in Chinese would suggest to me that something bad has happened.

Finally, I choose words and make meaning based on how I usually communicate in different situations. In online conversations, when I am usually more casual, I would choose words or phrases such as “seriously”, “I believe” when I want to appear more serious. These are words and phrases I rarely use in that context, so for me to use it means I am being serious. When speaking casually, I would often include words such as “umm”, and I am less conscious about my grammar. When I decide to be serious, the lack of these words and a polished grammar speak for themselves.

I must admit that I am not as observant, and I rarely reflect on the way I use words in different scenarios. So unfortunately, apart from me being serious or not, which is something I am aware of, I was unable to provide much evidence or description of how I use a more nuanced vocabulary. In fact, this reading response itself is probably the best source I have with me right now. My choice to use the word “I” says how formal this reading response is. My use of words such as “probably” and many other phrasal verbs suggest how I want this reading response to flow naturally, and my avoidance of using linguistical terms imply

I do not see this as an academic paper, but more of an anecdotal evidence. Why else should I avoid them? Nevertheless, these are good examples of how I personally use languages based on word choice, and they also peer into how one might be more selective with words to get the correct meaning across.