Field: Reading

Teaching free indirect discourse to advanced students

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Although free indirect speech (FIS) and free indirect thought (FIT) have been of great interest to linguists and literary scholars as means of presenting protagonists' speech or thought, they have rarely been discussed even in linguistics or literature classes in Japanese universities. This might be due to the fact that these two forms are characterized in terms of the mixture of a protagonist's and the narrator's voices and the decision to make an FIS or FIT reading mainly depends on the contexts in which that decision occurs rather than their syntactic features. The stylistic ambiguity and formal vagueness of FIS and FIT seem to discourage instructors from introducing them into classroom teaching. The ability to recognise FIS and FIT, however, greatly helps advanced students to understand both fictional and non-fictional narrative texts and provides analytical tools for processing the text.

This paper suggests teaching FIS and FIT to literature or linguistics students so that they could first recognise FIS and FIT in texts and then explain the effects of these forms relating them to the context and text-type in which they occur. In the first phase of teaching, formal characteristics of prototypical FIS will be introduced, comparing it with direct speech (DS) and indirect speech (IS), as an intermediate form between the two:

IS: He said that he would return to the hospital to see her the following day.

FIS: He would come back here to see her again tomorrow.

DS: He said, 'I'll come back here to see you again tomorrow.'

As FIT is a thought presentation form which is syntactically parallel to FIS, a comprehensive approach to these two forms would be pertinent in this introductory phase. FIS is regarded as a freer form than IS because the omission of the reporting clause cancels the subordination of the reported clause and the reported clause is syntactically independent. Although the verb tense and pronouns of FIS usually match those of narration, FIS has another freer DS-like feature: deictic expressions designated from the reported speaker's point of view rather than the narrator's
point of view. In the example above, 'here' and 'tomorrow,' are the deictic expressions which are linked to the reported speaker's viewpoint. FIS and FIT have pragmatic, textual and narratological functions which are quite different from each other, but these two modes tend to be confused and conflated even in recent studies. In the second phase, emphasising such functional differences between the two modes, actual examples of FIS and FIT will be presented, and their effects will also be discussed. In fictional texts, FIS is often used for generating a distancing or ironic effect, while in journalistic discourse, it tends to appear immediately after, or in the middle of, the same protagonist's continuous speech presentation. FIT tends to concentrate in fictional texts, depicting a protagonist's inner world and is rarely used in non-fictional texts. In the final phase of teaching, students give a three-minute presentation, using a short excerpt of their own choice either from a fictional or non-fictional text which contains either FIS or FIT cases. They are required to explain the reason why they identify a particular segment either as FIS or FIT and the effect the segment has on the reader's interpretation.

The students' presentation showed that the majority of the students who received the instruction were able to identify FIS/FIT segments correctly and explain the effect which was intended by the use of the form from the linguistic and contextual perspectives. A few students failed to recognise FIS/FIT examples, mainly because they did not understand the settings and context of the narrative on which they gave a presentation. Some students commented that the instruction helped them to recognise FIS/FIT while reading and this gave them a clearer understanding of the text.