Who taught you to read? What is it that enhances proficiency in the ability to read? More importantly, how are humans able to relate to text on a page with no prior relations with the referent, or writer? As a mother of two and a scholar in Language Studies and Technical Communications, I find it more than necessary to read to my children on a regular basis. It introduces my three year old to words that he has yet to learn or would not be exposed to, such as those words used primarily in written narration such as “however” and “therefore”. As for my one year old, it allows her the opportunity to hear a constant flow of language for her to mimic and slowly learn to utilize over time.

Whoever taught you to read had to have had an elaborate knowledge base grounded in phonetics and phonology in order to be successful in your learning. Phonemes are the individual units of sound in a language, thus making phonetics the inventory of sounds in a language. Phonology, then, is the set of rules involved in combining sounds in a language. While it is not the only aspect of linguistics that helps children learn to read, learning and becoming aware that words can be broken down into units as well as having a general understanding of the linguistic structure of a language can more than enhance one’s reading abilities.

Reading is an act that most everyone takes part in multiple times per day. It is an automatic process put forth to make sense of what has been absorbed by the eye and fed to the brain. For the literate reader, semantics allow for us to comprehend words and sentences without much exerted effort. “Linguistics for Everyone: An Introduction”, written by Kristin Denham and Anne Lobeck, defines semantics as the “system of rules underlying our knowledge of word and sentence meaning” (p286). This is the system that allows the human brain to automatically recall definitions and meanings from our mental lexicons for use in the comprehension of what is being read.

As a result of the phenomena of semantics, reading becomes much more than just comprehending the words on the page (or computer). In his Overview of Psycholinguistic Reading Theory, Christopher G Hayes establishes reading into a sequence of cues. These cues are “graphic cues” which are made up of the individual letters and words, the afore mentioned “semantic cue” which establishes a reader’s ability to comprehend word and sentence meaning from preformed knowledge stored in the mental lexicon, and the “syntactic cues” which are made up of the grammatical rules of word arrangement within a language. Graphic cues are simply what are seen with the eye that leads to the process of attaining meaning and comprehension. Utilizing semantics is a key note in comprehension because the more a reader brings with them inside their mental lexicon, the more he/she can relate to the words and grasp the thoughts before them. Syntactic cues allow for the reader to assume what will come next in preceding sentences by using grammatical rules that are placed inherently throughout a language.

It is through the proficient reader’s knowledge of grammatical rules of syntax and the use of semantics that he/she is able to interpret words and sentences into thoughts and comprehend the ideals of the writer. Without the knowledge of these rules, a reader would simply skim the surface of the text without attaching meaning and comprehension to the thoughts of the writer. By attaching personal definitions and meanings from the reader’s personal lexicon, the reader is able to comprehend the deep structure of words from the surface structure thus allowing them to attain a greater understanding of what is being communicated.

Without the meaning established by exploring the deeper structure of language, words are merely instruments or morphemes. It is not until these words are related to and utilized that words truly gain meaning, according to C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards in their book “The Meaning of Meaning”. To explain his thoughts on the use of semantics, Richards uses a “Semantic Triangle”. The triangle shows the relationships between the symbol (spoken or written word), the reference (thought), and the referent (the thinker). When the referent reads or hears a word, there is a natural response to access personal meaning by tapping into past experiences and foreknowledge, which is stored in a person’s mental lexicon. Because of this automatic response, a reader is then able to connect with, not only the words, but the thoughts on the page in order to grasp a sufficient understanding of what the writer has meant to convey.



Noam Chomsky, known to some as the father of modern linguistics, proposed a theory of syntactic structure in which he separated the comprehension of text into two layers. The first layer, surface structure, constitutes the words on the page while the deep structure is the underlying meaning of the words. Therefore, the theory explains that a highly literate reader will read and absorb the surface structure (the text), then will use his/her semantic cue (mental lexicon) and syntactic cue (grammatical rules) to form meaning from the text on the page. This deeper meaning is what is called the deep structure of the sentence.

The ability to take what is on the surface and dig deeper is the difficulty of learning to read. Even before a child can relate to what has been written, they learn to break down the words and “sound them out” to learn how to read each individual word (morpheme). This is reading on the surface level. As the child ages and matures, his/her mental lexicon expands rapidly. With experience and reading practice, the maturing mind becomes able to peer into the deep structure of what is written by relating to the thoughts and ideals presented. Even now, if I reread a book or story that I had read early in life, I frequently leave it with a deeper conception and understanding of the subject matter. More often, I relate differently to the words on the page and can form my own relevance in correlation to them.

Reading is, and will remain, a primary part of intellectual learning. It is interesting to study and realize how much is involved in the act of reading, which seems to be a simple, automatic process. Upon this realization, it is important to be sure to read deeper and not just skim the surface level of text. The English written language, as well as every language, is a deep and complex structure which takes time and intellect to master and deserves such diligence. The beauty of linguistics, as well as that of the human brain processes, cannot fully be appreciated without being given the time to comprehend the processes of each.

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