

Asides—

By the Way, Why Not Teach Them?

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Studying Shakespearean literature in undergraduate school, I learned that an "aside" was a line or phrase, sometimes seemingly digressive, that occurred mid-stream in a dialogue and was directed at the audience rather than at the "on stage" interlocutors, who indeed did not even hear it. The remark, made obliquely and in lowered pitch to the audience, served as a window on the real or ulterior motives of the speaker and may also have served to comment on the passing action. Thus, while it was not part of the central text-level meaning, the aside still had an important meaning and function within the total context. For example, Hamlet says of his uncle in an aside to the audience "a little more than kin and less than kind", a play on words which leaves us in no doubt about his true feelings.

The above definition can be stretched to apply to a phenomenon common in everyday language. Here an aside would be a little chunk of language that occurs within a spoken text, is connected (although tangentially) to its main meaning and is subordinated to the main syntactical features of the discourse. It is like a parenthetical remark—off the main track of the discourse but meaningfully connected. An example might help:

"I was out shopping—looking for an umbrella actually—I was deliberately wanting to buy one with a straight rather than a hooked handle so that I wouldn't end up hanging it over something—like a

door handle—and walk off and forget it (that's how I lost my last two umbrellas)—it wasn't easy to find what I wanted and so I ended up going to a big department store...

Here the remark in brackets is an "aside." In writing, of course, there is no problem whatever in recognizing an aside: it is marked off from the main syntactical elements of the sentence and the main textual meaning by the brackets which serve very visibly to identify it. However, in spoken language the parameters that brackets set have to be established through other means. In a very formal register, one can, of course, echo the written device by saying "parenthetically speaking...". But for more common, everyday registers this won't serve us. The aside thus needs to be established through other devices, mostly phonological: such as lowered pitch and volume and increased speed. It may also be signalled lexically with fixed formulaic phrases (like "by the way", "incidentally", "of course"); and may be reinforced by meaningful body language, like raised eyebrows, or particular hand gestures or facial expressions. In the example given, a facial expression of exasperation would be an apt accompaniment). The sense is important to the main narrative—in the example provided, it gives us a reason for why the speaker was looking for a particular kind of umbrella and why she ended up in the department store—but it is not central to the main narrative thrust.

Why We Don't Teach Asides but Should

Historically, we haven't spent much time, if any, in teaching asides in English language teaching. Originally this was probably through ignorance of the true nature of spoken language and a prejudiced preference for teaching written language as the standard form. In more recent years, with closer attention to the real nature of language, and a welcome emphasis in linguistics on language as it is, not as it "might" or "should" be, there has been a tendency to aim for gist or extensive listening comprehension. This itself was a reaction to the "testing" nature of comprehension-style questions that approached the teaching of listening no differently from the teaching of reading. While the new global, anti-atomistic approach was a laudable step in the development of applied linguistics, it did leave unattended those little parts of language, like asides, that are incidental to and outside the broader areas of comprehension.

Another reason why they are ignored is that many language materials use spoken language texts that are closer in discourse genre to the written language code. We don't often hear real and natural spoken texts being used in the classroom. Hence exposure to asides has traditionally been minimal.

Nevertheless, we should teach asides. They are an important feature of natural language and a peculiar feature of the spoken code. We need to take these features into consideration in some meaningful way. Furthermore, non-native learners of English will always be disadvantaged if their understanding stops

at gist comprehension and falls short of the deeper and often personal meanings that asides can carry.

Asides Need Active Teaching

Comprehension of asides does not just "happen" with time or by osmosis. It actually requires close and active teaching. Unless comprehension is promoted in this way, learners are likely to miss out on them. In fact, they may not even know that they are missing them. There are a few reasons for this. Being low in pitch and volume and fast in pace (relative to the main syntactical elements of speech) asides may simply not be heard by the listener who may be trapped in a sort of vicious circle. Not having been taught about asides, the learner is not expecting to hear them. Thus when they do occur, lack of expectation facilitates "deafness" and the aside may not even register as heard, let alone as "meaningful sound". Often too, asides assume in the listener a tacit and shared cultural base and may be so very implicit that the non-native is incapable of "filling in the bits" that are omitted but assumed understood. Sometimes, too, there is an element of humor involved, again implicitly assuming a cultural base with which the non-native is likely to lack familiarity. Furthermore, in decoding natural confluent speech the non-native's attention is totally bound up with unscrambling sentence-level meaning. In this context, the aside may become "the icing on the cake."

Teaching Asides

Four suggestions for promoting the understanding of asides follow. They are based on the premise that the first step in aural recognition is expectation:

1. Sensitize learners through exposure by having them listen to many samples of natural and confluent speech containing asides. This practice will sensitize them to the existence, form, role and purpose of these devices.
2. Teach learners the formulaic expressions that often serve to signal a forthcoming aside: "well," "you know," "by the way," "as you know," etc.
3. Sensitize learners to the other signals by which asides may be recognized: changes in pitch, volume and pace and accompanying paralanguage.
4. Instruct learners to understand the syntactic features involved: how the aside itself operates as a hiatus in the syntax of the sentence; that, were it removed, the syntax of the principal components of the sentence grammar would usually remain unchanged.

Conclusion

As long as non-natives are not privy to the meaning that resides in an aside, they are and will remain "on the outside" of native-speaker discourse. As ESL teachers, part of our task is to bring them inside. Sensitization to the concept of the aside is one small step in this process of empowerment.