Reporting phrases in English prose

REPORTING PHRASES IN ENGLISH PROSE

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In an attempt to get beyond subjective impressionism, contemporary stylistics is looking for formal stylistic criteria in morphology and syntax as well as in the vocabulary. We have started from a hypothesis that reporting verbs, i.e. verbs used in conjunction with direct speech, could be a feature of the stylistic individuality of an author or even a whole literary period, and that this material could be substantial evidence because the semantic and the syntactic criteria do not interfere with each other here, all verbs being in only two structural patterns, and because the context is the same (introducing direct speech).

Excerption of 2,500 lines from each of 29 authors ranging from the 18th to the 20th century brought a corpus of 5,707 reporting phrases. In each work the number of reporting phrases, the number of various reporting verbs and the ratio between the two were established. Then on the basis of an analysis of the structure of semantic relations among the verbs of individual writers a correlation was sought with the stylistic conclusions achieved following an analysis of other stylistic data.

All reporting verbs can be classified according to whether their meaning is fundamentally: I. a vocal utterance, II. a process of thought, III. some external activity. Groups I and II can be further subdivided according to whether a rational, emotive or volitional element predominates in the meaning of the verb. Within group III two sub-groups can be made according to whether the face (mimicry) or the body (gesticulation and body movements) is the source of the movement.

The verbs of group II and especially of group III bring us to the problem of whether they can still be interpreted as reporting phrases, or whether they should not rather be called semi-reporting or something similar. Their formal features, i.e. punctuation, do not bring us any nearer to a solution because the punctuation of reporting phrases is becoming more and more unsettled. With the development of prose the reporting phrase tends to become independent: from a colon, which indicated the connection with the communication of the direct speech we can observe a transition to a comma, which is evidence of mere parallelness between the reporting phrase and the direct speech. The most recent development in punctuation is the use of a full stop; between the two parts of communication there is merely a contextual interrelation. Compare several quotations from Hemingway:

She put out her hand: 'Good night.' 17.29
'Good-bye,' he patted my hand. 17.61
I pressed her hand, 'Dear Catherine...' 17.28
'No understand,' Rinaldi shook his head. 17.20
'Yes there is.' Passini shook his head. 17.43

Czech, with its stricter requirements of punctuation, often makes the Czech translator adapt the punctuation of reporting phrases, as shown in the following example from Hemingway:

He broke off, 'I must do something about getting you out of here.' 17.49

A skončil rázně: 'Musím to nějak zařídit.' 17.55

We cannot see any solution other than to widen the definition of reporting phrases to make it include also cases which are instances of what we call 'contextual relation to the direct speech', as exemplified by the following samples from Cary:

Her temper flies out. 'What a brute you are.' 22.14
Tabitha has been much alarmed. 'But Dick, are you ill?' 22.36
Tabitha is suspicious. 'What kind of a job?' 22.43
The girl's high temper explodes in a rage. 'If I didn't tell you, you'd never do anything.' 22.35

REPORTING VERBS IN THE ENGLISH NOVEL OF THE 18TH CENTURY. In the first half of the 18th century the English novel is only in the first stage of its development. Nevertheless, or just for this reason, there are striking differences in the reporting phrases among various authors. Fielding avoids direct speech so strictly that, even in a sample twice as long, fewer reporting phrases occur than in any other novel of the 18th to 20th centuries. He is able to do with a mere nine reporting verbs, and all of them except *cry* are verba dicendi, with the rational element predominating: *add, answer, begin, continue, proceed, say, speak, with the words*. Verbs of emphatic utterance and volitional verbs (*assert, assure, exhort, promise, beg, declare*, etc.) are used by Fielding in indirect speech only, but then they occur very frequently.

Smollet makes a medium use of direct speech, and likes to vary the reporting verbs; as a matter of fact, he is so keen on not using one verb too often that the total of reporting verbs in his work is higher than in any other novel of the 18th and 19th centuries with the exception of Bronte's novels. *Cry* (30 occurrences) is very common, and so is *reply* (24), which accounts for a drop in the frequency of the verb *say*. In Smollet *say* can be found in only one fifth of the reporting phrases, which is the lowest ratio in all the English prose under examination.

Defoe and Richardson will be dealt with in the section on the novel written in the first person.

To come to a more general conclusion about the reporting phrases in the 18th century: the writers can make do with verba dicendi. Four of them, *accost, hold forth, open, pronounce*, are restricted in their occurrence to this century. The most marked difference from later centuries, however, is the fact that *say* is not preferred, its total occurrence being smaller than that of all the other reporting verbs together (in the prose of the 19th and 20th centuries we meet with this only quite exceptionally, in three writers from 25). Instead of *say* can be found *reply* (24 cases in Smollet), *answer* and *cry* (30 cases in Smollet, 12 in Fielding). The writer makes no attempt to determine in any detail the mental condition of the author of the direct speech (the emotive character of the direct speech is signalized by a very general word *cry*). Incidentally, this is a practice which has been rediscovered by the writers of the 20th century.

REPORTING VERBS IN THE ENGLISH NOVEL OF THE 19TH CENTURY. The investigated writers were mostly from the second half of the 19th century: Austen, Brontë, Mrs. Gaskell, George Eliot, Stevenson, Jerome, Hardy, Wilde, Doyle, Mark Twain, Bret Harte, London. From the material they supplied the following tendencies can be uncovered.

Among verba dicendi there is a greater variability than there is now. Very strongly represented are *ask* and *answer* (the latter, we shall see, is going to be replaced by *say* in the course of the 20th century), and there is a number of verbs which later were to go out of use or, if not, acquire a literary or archaic connotation: *address, affirm, announce, ejaculate, enounce, interpose, inquire, observe, plead, pursue, remark, resume, retort, return, subjoin*—verbs that are mostly of Romance origin. The 19th century is characterised by the nominal construction *was + noun*, e.g. in Jack London *was his answer, contribution, greeting, rejoinder, reply, response, verdict*, in Brontë, among others, *was his conclusion, cry, demand, explanation, mandate.* In the sphere of emotive utterance no great range of verbs can be seen. In Brontë, for instance, four fifths of her reporting verbs are verba dicendi, in spite of the highly emotional subject matter of her novel. It is interesting that each author has his own favourite emotional reporting verb and that only the very basic verbs of the loud vocal utterance (*cry, exclaim, call out*) and of the subdued vocality (*whisper, murmur, mutter*) are generally widespread; these last three are extremely common in Wilde.

The excitement in direct speech, or the excited mental state of its author, is thus in the 19th century generally expressed by means of *cry.* Where the occurrence of *cry* is low, some explanation must be sought; it can vary: in Conan Doyle it is due to an advanced dialogization without reporting phrases; in Thomas Hardy and George Eliot it results from the stylization of the narrator as an impersonal observer; in Bret Harte, Jack London and Jerome K. Jerome it is due to the presence of many synonyms, as *hail, roar, shout, shriek.* The evidence supplied by the last three authors entitles us to claim that the differentiation among emotive reporting verbs, a feature characteristic of the 20th-century novel, has its roots in the lighter entertainment prose of the preceding century.

Let us now see the relation between the verb *say* and the other reporting verbs in the 19th century. Three types of prose can be differentiated:

a) the prose with a small number of reporting verbs and with a very frequent use of *say.* It is the prose of writers aiming at a simple narrative style, as George Eliot, Mrs. Gaskell and Conan Doyle. In Conan Doyle the number of reporting verbs is the smallest in the entire sample: he can make do with six most necessary verba dicendi *ask, answer, continue, cry, remark, say.* The form of his prose comes nearer to drama, with long passages without any reporting phrase.

b) The verb *say* and other reporting verbs (numbering from 22 to 28) are relatively balanced in their occurrence. This is the most common type of prose in the 19th century.

c) The total occurrence of various reporting verbs is twice as high as that of *say.* This reflects the author's tendency to write with a minimum repetition of reporting verbs. This is achieved either as Wilde writes, with an average stock of reporting verbs, but making an intensive use of each verb, or as in Jack London, who makes use of a great many reporting verbs, while using each of them once or twice only (in Jack London we can find the greatest variety—51 verbs—from all the authors of the 19th c.); among them can be found such highly emotive verbs as *blurt out, rumble, splutter, chant,* and the like.

REPORTING VERBS IN THE ENGLISH NOVEL OF THE 20TH CENTURY. Among verba dicendi with a predominating rational semantic element the range is narrowed down to ten to fifteen reporting verbs with clearly differentiated meanings, i.e. the literary variants common in the previous century have disappeared. If, for instance, the writer adopts *reply*, he never uses *answer*, and reversely. It is interesting that *ask* gets

as its counterpart *say,* and not, as we should expect, *answer* or *reply:* in 13 authors there are only 24 *reply* and 26 *answer* to 152 *ask.* In the 18th century the ratio was reverse—*ask* hardly ever introduced direct speech, and both *reply* and *answer* were widespread.

As an illustration of the selection of verba dicendi here is their list taken from Graham Greene. From 23 of his reporting verbs just eight are verba dicendi: *add, ask, explain, go on, repeat, reply, tell, say.* Similarly from 26 verbs in Joyce Cary only six are verba dicendi: *answer, ask, begin, query, remark, tell, say.*

Among emotive verbs we can notice a drop in *cry* as against the 19th century, while *call, exclaim, whisper, murmur, mutter* are doing fairly well. Some new verbs appear for the first time to take up the place vacated by the departure of *cry: shout, yell, snap, moan, gasp, hiss.* They reflect the excited action and the violent reactions of the characters of 20th century prose.

And now a word or two on individual authors. They can be classified into two groups. The first group comprises those in whom the occurrence of *say* is several times more numerous than the total occurrence of all the other reporting verbs. The ratio of *say* to the remaining verbs ranges from 3 : 1 in London to 33 : 1 in Compton-Burnett. In Hemingway (127 *say*), Faulkner (325 *say*) and Steinbeck (200 *say*) the high frequency of *say* is an outcome of their tendency not to comment on the attitude of the character uttering a direct speech, to say nothing in advance about the quality of emotion they are experiencing, that is to say, they try to reduce the author's interference to a minimum. These authors avoid emotive reporting verbs on the same grounds: Hemingway makes use only of *shout, moan, call back,* Faulkner uses several verbs expressing a loud vocal utterance (his favourite one is *holler*) and likewise from Steinbeck's 24 verbs only seven are non-dicendi.

This stylistic device of reporting phrases with *say* was taken over later by lesser writers trying to imitate the style of the masters of American prose. In our survey they are represented by O'Connor (168 *say*) and Sloane (236 *say*). In Sloane the total occurrence (19) of emotive verbs is the smallest in the whole of the prose subject to our investigation.

Greene with his 203 occurrences of *say* also belongs to this group. The composition of his other reporting verbs is different, though: 15 from 23 of his verbs are emotive; this can be explained by the fact that for a precise psychological description of his characters he needs finely differentiated verbs from the semantic spheres of emotion and volition.

Compton—Burnett's novels are so much in dialogue as to resemble drama. She avoids emotive verbs, except the subdued *murmur* and *mutter,* using *say* only when the reader is in the danger of losing the track of which character is speaking at the moment.

London, Farrell, Wouk, Montserrat and Jones form one sub-group: what is common for them all is the ratio between *say* and the other verbs being smaller than 10 : 1. They have such a large stock of reporting verbs that the first 2,500 lines failed to give a representative sample and we had to go through the whole novel, though, of course, only the excerption from the first 2,500 lines was included in our statistics. However, in Farrell only 36 p.c., in Jones 38 p.c., in Wouk 57 p.c. and in Montserrat 64 p.c. of the verbs were supplied by the first 2,500 lines. The semantic groups I, II and III are extensively represented. Most striking, however, is the high specialization of emotive vocal utterances. In a single novel (by Wouk) there are the following verbs expressing a loud, violent or harsh sound: *bawl, bellow, blare, bleat,*

boom, burst out, explode, rattle, roar, scream, screech, shout, snap, squeak, yell; or express-
ing a quiet or subdued vocal utterance: *breathe, choke, croak, gasp, groan, growl, hiss,
moan, mumble, murmur, pant, purr, whine, whisper*—and all this in addition to the
traditional reporting verbs, as *call, cry, exclaim.*

So much for the group in which *say* is many times more numerous than the
occurrence of all the other reporting verbs together. The second group, where it is
the other way round, i.e. the verb *say* is exceeded by the sum of occurrences of other
verbs, includes two authors only: Cary and Sansom. This is partially explainable by
the psychological character of their novels, and partly it is an individual approach
to reporting verbs (compare the quotations from Cary in the introduction to this
paper).

NOVELS WRITTEN IN THE FIRST PERSON (18TH—20TH CENTURIES). It can be gen-
erally said that a character in a novel has a more limited vocabulary than the author
has, and therefore the narrating character's stock of reporting verbs is smaller than the
resources available to the author. Richardson knows only *add, continue, cry, give
a shriek, reply, think, whisper, say*. Unlike other reporting verbs, the verb *say* fulfils
still another function, namely, it signalizes the communication by a person other
than the narrating character. Besides, the repeated use of *say* characterizes the speech
of a simple speaker, suggesting the spontaneity of his utterances. Richardson's
Pamela as well as Defoe's Moll Flanders make ample use of *say*. For Defoe the stock
of seven verbs was sufficient—*add, answer, cry, reply, return, say*, but *say* occurs
eleven times more frequently than all the other verbs together.

What has been said about Richardson and Defoe holds good even more for Mark
Twain. The reporting verbs here are kept within the boundaries of the vocabulary of
a small boy, with constant use of *say* and a single instance of *holler* and *sing out*.
Compare the following passage:

> So Jim says: 'Hello you!' But it didn't budge. So I hollered again, and then Jim says: De man
> ain't asleep—he's dead. You hold still—I'll go en see.' He went, and bent down and looked,
> and says: 'It's a dead man.' 14.64

If it is necessary to use some other reporting verb than *say*, it is not used alone but
together with *say*. E.g.:

> Jim whispered and said ...14.83
> I heard a voice wail out and say ...14.83
> The man would laugh and say ...14.83
> The captain broke in and says ...14.37

Excitement also contributes to the frequency of *say*. Compare the passages from
George Eliot and William Faulkner:

> and he says, 'Wilt thou have this man to thy wedded wife?' says he, and then he says, 'Wilt
> thou have this woman to thy wedded husband?' says he. 8.59
> Louvinia kept on trying to tell us about it...: 'Marse John setting on the porch and them
> Yankees riding through the flower beds and say, 'Brother, we wanter know where the rebel
> John Sartoris lives,' and Marse John say, 'Hey' with his hand to his ear and his face like he
> born loony..., and Yankee say, 'Sartoris, John Sartoris,' and Marse John say, 'Which? Say
> which?' until he know Yankee stood about all he going to, and Marse John say, 'Oh, John
> Sartoris. Whyn't you say so in the first place?' and Yankee cussing him for idiot fool, and Marse
> John say, 'Hey? How's that?' and Yankee say, 'Nothing. Nothing. Show me where John
> Sartoris is...' and Marse John say, ...' 18.49

When the narrating character reports verbatim on a quick debate, he must intro-
duce the subjects as often as possible. The verb *say* turns then into a mere prop-up
for the subject. A passage from Hemingway can serve as a good example:

Author and Work	1st Ed.	Verbs	Sentences	*Say*	Others	Ed. excerpted from
1) Fielding: Tom Jones	1749	9	61	29	32	Gay & Bird, London
2) Smollet: Roderick Random	1748	33	149	34	115	Dent, London
3) Defoe: Moll Flanders	1722	7	191	176	15	Dent, London
4) Richardson: Pamela	1740	8	335	315	20	Dent, London
5) Austen: Pride and Prejudice	1813	16	163	85	78	Panther Books, Leipzig
6) Ch. Bronte: Jane Eyre	1847	45	142	39	103	Oxford U.P.
7) Mrs. Gaskell: Cranford	1853	23	82	44	38	Dent, London
8) G. Eliot: Silas Marner	1861	13	123	107	16	Panther Book, Leipzig
9) Stevenson: Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde	1886	24	247	117	130	Tauchnitz, Leipzig
10) Jerome: Three Men in a Boat	1889	28	120	66	54	Forlag, Stockholm
11) Hardy: Jude the Obscure	1896	22	117	62	55	Tauchnitz, Leipzig
12) Wilde: The Picture of Dorian Gray	1891	29	202	65	137	Tauchnitz, Leipzig
13) Doyle: The Hound of Baskerville	1902	6	96	77	19	Tauchnitz, Leipzig
14) Mark Twain: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn	1884	3	84	82	2	Seven Seas, Berlin
15) Bret Harte: A Waif of the Plains	1890	27	150	98	52	Tauchnitz, Leipzig
16) London: Burning Daylight	1910	51	155	39	116	Tauchnitz, Leipzig
17) Hemingway: A Farewell to Arms	1926	12	169	127	42	Penguin Books
18) Faulkner: The Unvanquished	1934	21	188	131	57	Signet Books
19) Steinbeck: The Grapes of Wrath	1939	24	260	200	60	Penguin Books
20) Farrell: Studs Lonigan	1932	36	396	325	71	New York, The Modern Library
21) G. Greene: The Heart of the Matter	1948	23	268	203	65	Heinemann, London
22) Cary: A Fearful Joy	1949	26	129	61	68	Michael Joseph, London
23) Montserrat: The Cruel Sea	1951	33	201	125	76	Penguin Books
24) Compton-Burnett: Daughters and Sons	1937	13	435	418	17	Albatross Book
25) Sansom: The Loving Eye	1956	46	127	54	73	London, The Hogarth Press
26) Wouk: The Caine Mutiny	1951	37	197	139	58	Signet Books
27) Jones: From Here to Eternity	1951	47	379	292	87	Signet Books
28) Sloane: The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit	1955	22	432	326	106	Pocket Books, Inc.
29) O'Connor: The Last Hurrah	1956	16	189	168	21	Signet Books

I made you drunk, *said* the major. I made you drunk because I love you and because America is in the war. Up to the hilt, I *said*. You go away in the morning, baby, Rinaldi *said*. To Rome, I *said*. No, to Milan. To Milan, *said* the major, to the Crystal Palace, to the Cova, to Compari, to Biffi's, to the galleria. You lucky boy. To the Gran Italia, I *said*, where I will borrow money from George. To the Scala, *said* Rinaldi. You will go to the Scala. Every night, I *said*. You won't be able to afford it every night, *said* the major. 17.64

CONCLUSION. We can now try to sum up. In the last 200 years the reporting phrases have undergone a development. The original function of the reporting verb was merely to signalize direct speech. The authors could make do with a very small number of verbs and they could make variations at will. That the small number of reporting verbs was not evidence of the paucity of their vocabulary is shown by the wide range of verbs in their indirect speech. With further development of prose, and with advancing mastery of the technique of direct speech, part of the semantic content of the direct speech began to overspill into the reporting phrases: the reporting verb begins to function as a communication about the mental attitude (and later on also about the physical appearance reflecting this inner state) taken up by the character using the direct speech. The stock of reporting verbs grows quickly, and verbs describing mental states and the speaker's mimicry come into use. As the difference between the traditional verba dicendi and the verbs from these new spheres tends to disappear, the punctuation becomes less stable, and instead of a colon as a boundary between the reporting phrase and the direct speech we often meet with a comma and a full stop.

Inside several semantic spheres of the reporting verbs a shift can be discovered, e.g. in the group *ask-reply-answer-say* (a general retreat in favour of *say*) or in the group *cry-exclaim-call* (breaking up into a series of finely shaded verbs of vocal emphasis).

A third conclusion offers itself: when we conceive a stylistic device as a deviation from the norm or a deviation from the context of the whole prose, then the selection of the reporting verb becomes a stylistic device. By selection we do not mean a choice between two single verbs near in meaning but a choice between the verba dicendi on the one hand and the verbs expressing the attitude of the author of direct speech on the other hand. It can also be stated that in the 18th century the verbum dicendi was unmarked, so that the stylistic effect was achieved, for instance, by using *assure*, *advice* against the background of *tell, say, continue, add, return*. In the 20th c. it is the other way round: as the verbs referring to the attitude of the character have become common, the verba dicendi are marked, so that a consistent use of *say* against the background of other contexts abounding in verbs such as *stumble*, *apologize, moan, blurt out*, etc., as in the prose of Hemingway or Compton—Burnett, gives the verb *say* an emotive value, and turns it into a stylistic device.

R E S U M É

Uvozovací věty v anglické próze

Práce je založena na zpracování 5707 uvozovacích vět z 29 anglických autorů 18. až 20. století. Srovnávají se uvozovací slovesa v rámci jednoho díla i v rámci století a hledají se vývojové tendence. Jako hlavní rys vychází najevo, že sémantický obsah přímé řeči začíná od 19. století přesahovat do věty uvozovací, neboť se jeví potřeba přesněji vykreslit duševní postoj zaujímaný autorem přímé řeči a registrovaný autorem románu. Tento posun v sémantickém těžišti umožnil stovkám dalších sloves stát v uvozovací větě, na druhé straně však způsobil zánik četných sloves dicendi.