Miššíková, Gabriela

Pragmatic dimensions in stylistic analysis

GABRIELA MIŠŠÍKOVÁ

PRAGMATIC DIMENSIONS IN STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

The present paper deals with a pragmatic model of meaning as applicable in stylistic analysis and some other concepts traditionally dealt with in pragmatics. We shall view the process of stylistic analysis as a multi-level procedure emphasizing the connections between semantic and pragmatic aspects of the text. In this respect we attempt to view the text as discourse between the writer and the reader and thus our analysis also provides comments on specific discourse characteristics.

Exploring the stylistic means of the short story we focus on the study of the phenomenon known as foregrounding and the quality of openness in text. In English stylistics foregrounding (as an opposite pole to backgrounding) is an important concept while openness is a crucial text quality studied in text linguistics. Foregrounding and openness may seem to be quite different in nature; however, we shall see that they can overlap in many aspects.

This paper aims to reveal the significance of the above indicated aspects of style and discourse in the process of reading, analysing and understanding texts. A sample analysis of Doris Lessing's short story In Defence of the Underground is intended to illustrate the presented theoretical approach.

Introduction

Assuming that any text is a (written) communication with particular functions and purposes, the process of reading means participating in it. A reader becomes part of a discourse; his task (and desire) is to decode the message conveyed by the text, and also to decipher those meanings which are encoded between the lines. Reading and understanding texts can be viewed as a process of tracing text relations which are necessarily incomplete, and the reader has to look for the 'clues' both in the text and in his mind to bridge various gaps in the text (cf. Van Peer 1989: 279). Enhancing semantic dimensions in stylistic analysis (SA) means to account for a variety of contextual meanings as provided by the interplay between the lexical meanings expressed in the text and specific extensions of meaning created by (more or less) unique connotations in particular contexts. The

implementation of pragmatic dimensions in SA means to focus on the analyzing and understanding of socio-cultural, political or historical features of the text, particular techniques of foregrounding, such as deviation and parallelism, are often relevant for our recognition of text and discourse structures.

Semantic versus pragmatic dimensions in SA

A semantic dimension in stylistic analysis (SA) can help us to see the network of lexical relations in its complexity. In general, we can identify a variety of semantic relations, such as synonymy, antonymy and hyponymy, as efficient means of lexical cohesion. Similarly, patterns of repetition of lexical units and their arrangement within a text show how we perceive reality and how we cope with it in a given social context. Particular lexical items can be highlighted as capable of conveying pragmatic meanings. For instance the lexical meaning conveyed by the words in a sentence *There used to be decent lavatories, but now they are locked up because they are vandalized as soon as repaired* (Lessing 1993: 81) primarily indicates the problem of vandalism (further expressed in *but often a window is smashed, and there is always graffiti*). Namely the words *locked up*, *vandalized* and *repaired* imply a critical view of a particular social problem related to the present time. In addition, assumptions which evoke nostalgia for the good old days and signals of different views of London, including biased judgements and prejudices, are easily inferable from the given context.

As for the discourse organization, the place and time deixis (*there* and *now*) together with other expressions of time (*used to be* and *as soon as*) mark the discourse structure clearly.

The importance of context for understanding a text can be further illustrated by a set of lexical items whose semantic meanings are related and similar. These items are classified as contextual synonyms and help to foreground particular 'clues' in the text so that the reader can relate the messages encoded in the text to his own socio-cultural background, knowledge and experiences. In other words, an attentive reader is capable of inferring specific signals and can reconstruct the coherence of the text. On the one hand, those lexical items which are semantically related function as powerful means of lexical cohesion. On the other hand they provide direct clues for restoration of the coherence of the passage. In the following text, this particular arrangement of lexical items creates a picture of a famous university whose elite students (*young people, graduates, the privileged young*), in spite of their *ingenious social life*, still have *a need for systematic destruction*. A broader text sample is necessary to illustrate the importance of the context:

> It is not that they are depraved because they are deprived, for I have just visited a famous university up north, where they have twenty applications for every place, where ninety-nine per cent of the graduates get jobs within a year of leaving. These are the privileged young, and they make for them-

selves a lively and ingenious social life their teachers clearly admire, if not envy. Yet they too smash everything up, not just the usual undergraduate loutishness, boys will be boys, but what seems to be a need for systematic destruction. What need? Do we know? (Lessing 1993: 82)

Opening with an interesting rhetorical device (i.e. paronomasia), the text conveys a range of meanings related to specific aspects of university education in Britain, namely the existence of elite schools and prestigious universities. Between the lines further messages are encoded, for instance the signals about the social status of teachers and students, etc. A pragmatic dimension of the text invites a comparative point of view: a cross-cultural comparison of the (British) reality as expressed by the text with the reader's (native or familiar) socio-cultural background is appealing. Text-external relations are clearly definable and the coherence of the text is smooth. The questions asked at the end of the paragraph create the openness of the text which enhances the reader's involvement and cooperation.

A pragmatic model of meaning

The study of meaning has traditionally been the field of philosophy and semantics. It is also studied as a part of various academic disciplines, for example psychology, semiotics and linguistics. As Cruse (2000) points out, the linguistic approach to meaning in language focuses on three key aspects. The first is that "'native speaker' semantic intuitions are centre-stage": they constitute the main source of primary data. The second is the importance of "relating meaning to the manifold surface forms" of language. The third is the "respect paid not just to language, but to languages" (Cruse 2000: 11). A very important task is to discover a way of specifying or describing meanings, whether of isolated words or sentences, or of utterances in context. Cruse takes a position that, in general, meanings are not finitely describable and tries to find the best way to approximate meaning as closely as possible to the intended meaning as is necessary for the speaker's purposes. Cruse's approach towards the study of meaning is close to pragmatics. The field of study is outlined in a more generous way than the scope of traditional linguistics and it seems that there is no clear dividing line between semantics and pragmatics in his approach. Considering the aims of our stylistic analysis, the meaning studied within the text is the one created in a flow of communication that is within a discourse between the author and the reader. In other words, within the process of stylistic analysis we study also the meanings which arise from the very act of communication taking place in a concrete situation. A traditionally viewed semantic approach would not suit our purposes because its primary focus is on the meaning as it comes out of the systematic relations holding between words, phrases, clauses and sentences. In the following example, the semantic message conveyed by the underlined sentences in a given abstract is enhanced by the use

of words which may carry revealing pragmatic meanings. For instance, the words *disregarded* and *report* seem to articulate social and cultural attitudes:

> 'I'll tell you what you can do,' says the Indian.
> <u>All this time I stand there, disregarded. They are too angry to care who hears them and, it follows, might report them.</u> Then the young white man says – he could be something in building, or a driver, 'You think I should do the same, then?' (Lessing 1993: 80)

Specific information coming primarily from the context indicates socio-cultural phenomena, such as the different mentality of non-native Londoners, conflicts between Indian shop-keepers and "the others", competition for work, etc. Other sensitive political and social issues are inferable from the contextual meanings of the expressions *he is on automatic* or *in his rage,* which are used to describe the heat of an argument later in the text.

   A pragmatic model of meaning, applicable in stylistic analysis, will investigate "the meaning of language in relation to a context of use and users" (Verdonk and Weber 1995: 13). Semantics concentrates on the meaning of the sentence as an abstract syntactic unit dissociated from a situational context, while "pragmatics centres on the meaning of the utterance", which is the concrete realization of a sentence in a context of use (Verdonk and Weber 1995: 13). As demonstrated by the following extract the nuances of meaning are often encoded in the network of lexical and contextual meanings:

> "Butterfly saris, workaday cardigans that make the statement, if you chose to live in a cold northern country, then this is the penalty. Never has there been a sadder sartorial marriage than saris with cardigans." (Lessing 1993: 84)

A vivid picture of multicultural London, an impressive depiction of a clash of different cultures, the uneasy adaptation of immigrants in a new setting and many other messages are palpable between the lines. However their full understanding is considerably determined by the reader's social and cultural background, his knowledge and personal experiences.

   An enhanced pragmatic approach in SA reveals a variety of sentence and text relations, pointing out the interaction between the writer and the reader. By means of the mental processes of integration and inference, the text-internal and text-external relations become more apparent and complete. Such analysis illustrates the mutual effort on the author's and the recipient's part to contribute towards the process of efficient communication.

Foregrounding, deviation and parallelism

A good starting point for the analysis of any text is to examine the foregrounded parts and provide analysis and interpretation which link those parts together. "Foregrounded features are the parts of the text which the author, consciously or unconsciously, is signalling as crucial to our understanding of what he has written..." (Short 1997: 36). Some authors call this strategy of linking together foregrounded features "cohesion of foregrounding" (Leech 1969). Foregrounded features in any text are those which break the rules established and respected at any language level. Native speakers of a language, just like many second language learners, recognise these features as odd, stylistically marked and highly expressive. However, as Short (1997: 37) points out, we need to make sure that "our intuitions are reasonable, and not based on personal whim", so we need to analyse and describe the nature of the deviation. Different kinds of deviation which can produce foregrounding can be recognised and classified in any text. We shall not attempt to provide a complete list of them, since the account would have to include too many phenomena, such as discoursal deviation (beginning in the middle – in medias res), semantic deviation (metaphors), lexical deviation (neologism, functional conversion), grammatical deviation (re-ordering of noun phrases, re-sequencing of phrases inside the normal subject-verb-object-adverbial order in poetry), morphological deviation ("playing" with morphemes such as in the poetry of e.e.cummings or prose of A. Burgess), phonological deviation (alliteration, assonance and rhyme) and graphological deviation (oddities in the written presentation of the text, such as capital letters, spacing, a blank blackened page as in L. Stern's Trisdam Shandy, etc.). Deviations at all linguistic levels require of the reader to infer the meaning and significance of the deviation. In the case of the phonological and graphological deviations, due to the relation between writing and speech, these inferences are connected with the ways we might read the text out loud. Reading the text aloud might in turn lead to deductions about the meaning (consider the poetry of e.e.cummings which is often labelled as "poetry of the eye").

In addition to this list, a different nature of internal deviation (deviation against a norm set up by the text itself) and external deviation (deviations listed above, i.e. deviation from some norm which is external to the text) would have to be pointed out, and many more details about parallelism would be required (cf. Miššíková 1999: 45).

As indicated by its title, our short story is devoted to the description of the past and present days of London's Underground. In order to express the atmosphere inside the trains, the author incorporates two poems into her text. These are the poems *provided by the keepers of the Underground, inserted into a row of advertisements* (Lessing 1993: 88). The poems are deviations against a norm set up by the text of the short story. By means of deviating from a genre norm, the poems are foregrounded in the text.

Foregrounding is often created by parallelism. In our text, parallel (noun) phrases and parallel (and contrasted) sentence structures *(I stand..., I know...,* contrasted to *she used to..., she did...,)* are used to create a well structured narration:

> Not long ago just where I stand marked the end of London. I know this be-
> cause an old woman told me she used to take a penny bus here from Marble
> Arch, every Sunday. That is, she did 'If I had a penny to spare, I used to save
> up from my dinners, I used to look forward all week.' (Lessing 1993: 80)

Foregrounding is often studied in poetry whose language (due to its aesthetic
function) is considered as the main source of unexpected and surprising usages
of language means. As Leech points out "foregrounding is a means to achieve
a goal: it is the creation of an effect, a special effect, hence a special meaning"
(Leech 1969: 58–61).

A pragmatic dimension in SA illustrates that "language is much more than
a neutral objective description of the world" and aims at the exploration of its
"social situatedness" (cf. Fowler 1986: 9).

The meaning of speech acts

As Short has put it, when we say things, we do not just say things. We also per-
form acts by saying what we do (Short 1997: 195). The same applies to writing,
and what works for the real world also works for the fictional world. When an
Indian in our short story says *I'll tell you what you can do*, he performs an act of
promising advice and support. The speech act is an important and flexible mecha-
nism that helps to interpret what we hear and read. In the opening paragraph of
our text we are taken to the Underground station, approaching it at first from the
outside:

> In a small cigarette shop outside the Underground station, the Indian behind
> the counter is in energetic conversation with a young man. They are both
> so angry that customers thinking of coming in change their minds. (Lessing
> 1993: 79)

The narrator performs the speech act of statement, realised by the grammatical
structures traditionally referred to as declarative sentences. The first sentence is
an informative statement. It provides the reader with several pieces of informa-
tion (e.g. there is a shop, it is a cigarette shop, it is small, its owner is an Indian,
the Indian is talking to a man, the man is young, their conversation is energetic).
There are expectations that arise from this speech act: the reader can expect that
something must have happened since the conversation is described as 'energetic'.
The second sentence, which is an evaluative statement, fulfils the reader's expec-
tations and thus approves of this interpretation which resulted from the mental
operation known as inference; that is, making use of one's personal knowledge
and experiences in order to clarify and complete text-external relations, or coher-
ence). The reader finds out that both men are angry and a comparison *so angry
that* makes the fact even more explicit. Both declarative sentences are perceived

as statements not only because of their grammatical structures, but also because of their situational and communicative context, which also includes the cultural background of the recipient of the text: the first sentence is the opening sentence of the story; the second one adds more detail and unfolds the story. The co-text plays a role too. The first sentence is an announcement, an in medias res beginning of the text. The second one supports the inner complexity of the text and exhibits strong cohesive links: the cohesion by the reference *they* and lexical cohesion *energetic – angry*, etc. As a result of quite complete text-internal relations, individual parts of the utterance can be easily integrated. So far, the text continues smoothly. However, an expectation of further development is clearly indicated and the reader becomes interested and involved in the story. The actual conversation between the two men starts in the following paragraph:

> They did my car in, they drove past so near they scraped all the paint off that side. I saw them do it. I was at my window – just luck that was. They were laughing like dogs. Then they turned around and drove back and scraped the paint off the other side. They went off like bats out of hell. They saw me at the window and laughed. (Lessing 1993: 79)

This utterance consists of a series of speech acts performed by the first man. It is followed by the response of the other man in the next paragraph. The succession of speech acts of particular participants of the conversation is commonly referred to as turn-taking. It is here where particular expectations, more or less influenced by the given conversational models and conventions (i.e. social and cultural background), on the reader's part are created and the tension arises from the ways and extent to which the expectations are fulfilled. As Short (1997: 195) points out, by "observing the speech acts which different people perform we can infer things about them and their relations with others". The sentences are all declarative speech acts. The speech is dynamic, the inverted word order, elliptical and interrupted sentence structures are evidence of a disturbed mind and strong emotions. These features are characteristic of a spoken utterance. Syntactic expressive means and stylistic devices are dominant (e.g. an ellipsis *the other side [...]*, an anacoluthon combined with stylistic inversion *I was at my window – just luck, that was.*), but some lexical means also contribute towards the expressiveness of the statement (e.g. the use of colloquial phrasal verbs *did my car in*). The use of common clichés *they were laughing like dogs* and *they went off like bats out of hell* evokes the spontaneity of colloquial language. Pragmatically, the act of turn-taking creates further expectations as for the response of the other man and also the continuation of the conversation. This will depend on the relationship between the two men. Accounting for the meaning created by the context, we realise that there is much more to be inferred than the actual accident with the car or the relationship between the two men. Out of the verbal interaction of the two protagonists, the picture of a multicultural setting and everyday life in a London suburb arises. The picture is made clearer and more complete as the narration de-

velops: it takes us on a journey on London's Underground and finally concludes at the end of the Jubilee line, where the narrator gets out. The journey provides plenty of opportunities to tell stories about, recall memories of, and express opinions on London and Londoners.

In the final part of this article specific functions of lexical expressive means and devices from the semantic and pragmatic point of view are analysed. The following extract offers several points for discussion:

> In my half of the carriage are three white people and the rest are black and brown and yellowish. Or, by another division, five females and six males. Or, four young people and seven middle-aged or elderly. Two Japanese girls, as glossy and self-sufficient as young cats, sit smiling. Surely, the mourners for old London must applaud the Japanese, who are never, ever, scruffy or careless? Probably not: in that other London there were no foreigners, only English, pinko-grey as Shaw said, always chez nous, for the Empire had not imploded, the world had not invaded, and while every family had at least one relative abroad administering colonies or dominions, or being soldiers, that was abroad, it was there, not here, the colonies had not come home to roost. (Lessing 1993: 84)

From a syntactic point of view, the elliptical and parallel sentence structures observed in this example are stylistically marked and foregrounded (for example, the parallelism with rhetoric effects: … *Empire had not imploded, the world had not invaded* …). The modality of sentences varies and, together with stylistic inversion, a smooth flow of discourse, resembling a spoken utterance, is created. The quality of spokenness is achieved by indirectness and confirmation-seeking (cf. Urbanová and Oakland 2003: 17) supported by modal adverbs (*surely, probably not*) which are often used to indicate attitudes in everyday speech. In addition to the variety of efficient syntactic stylistic devices, lexical devices contribute considerably towards the final effect. Analysing lexical items semantically, we have to point out the expressive power which arises from a clash between the lexical item itself and the context of a sentence. Thus we can classify lexical expressive means, for example polysemy of expressions like: *white, black, brown, yellowish*, *pinko-grey* (about people); *the mourners*, *that other London*, *chez nous*, etc. As a matter of fact, these semantically related lexical items are organized into patterns of oppositions, such as English people – the others; white people – black and brown people; females – males; old London/ other London – present times; home – abroad, etc. This semantic relatedness of the listed lexical items provides clear cohesive links in the text and also enhances smooth coherence. At the same time, some of these foregrounded items are used in a deictic function and as such, outline the structure of the discourse.

Accounting for the context of the given abstract, the effects created at the lexical level are best seen as complex codes which have to be decoded. The codes are almost unpredictable; however, they are of high complexity and informativeness.

Certainly, the description of the Japanese women with the feline figure of speech in *Two Japanese girls, as glossy and self-sufficient as young cats,* is genuinely metaphorically engaging. Associative meanings are crucial for our understanding of the speaker's intended meaning. In this sense we can infer an encoded message about the "famous" attitude of English people towards foreigners (*the Japanese, who are never, ever, scruffy, or careless* or *in that other London there were no foreigners*). Last but not least, shades of humour and a harmless irony seem to appear between the lines. It is these shades of meaning and a number of incomplete and hidden messages encoded in the text that point out the importance of that contextual dimension of discourse which is secured by our personal experiences, knowledge and socio-cultural background. In this respect, the perception of various allusions expressed in the text, for instance to G. B. Shaw, the British Empire and its colonies and dominions, etc. can be correctly decoded and adequate references to the past and present of London and its inhabitants discovered.

Conclusion

As illustrated above, semantic analysis reveals lexical relations between the words and sentences, but does not seem to account for the meanings which arise from the situational or verbal context of an utterance. Tracing cultural and cross-cultural references – that is, comparing what we read in the text with our personal experiences, knowledge and cultural background – seeks to complete text-external relations. These phenomena have to be deciphered and inferred in the text. Sometimes, culture-specific lexis provides clues for the reader and creates a more specific cultural "shading" of a text. More often, complex and elaborated stylistic devices, such as metaphor and metonymy, help to encode sophisticated messages.

The aim of this paper was to illustrate that exploring pragmatic dimensions in SA means to add an efficient extension to our analytical toolkit. In this approach the natural qualities of human communication are respected and explored in the full length.

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Doc. PhDr. Gabriela Miššíková, CSc.
Department of English and American Studies
Faculty of Arts, University of Constantine the Philosopher
Štefánikova 67
949 74 Nitra
Slovakia
gabimissik@yahoo.com