Utterances as literary discourse phenomena: a multi-dimensional approach to interpretation

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Abstract

Interpretation of utterances within literary discourse can be approached linguistically and extra-linguistically. The former aspect is referred to language competence and actual use of utterances, while the latter covers features only essential to written narration, i.e. author’s presence in the discourse. It is the author who imposes time, space, plot structure, and the system of characters, thus creating new discourse reality. These aspects coupled with the lack of prosodic and paralinguistic markers relevant to spoken discourse make the interpretation of narrated utterances more difficult and confusing, in comparison with that of spoken ones.

Key words: discourse analysis, text interpretation

Introduction

Adequate and accurate interpretation of utterances within literary discourse covers at least three dimensions which refer to a) general properties of discourse units; b) particular linguistic properties of narrated utterances, and c) extra-linguistic properties which lie beyond the interpreted piece of discourse though is closely connected to it.

Utterances being units of discourse, either written or spoken one, embody features common to both varieties, i.e. they are structured lexically, grammatically and pragmatically.

This general premise necessarily provokes the following question: Is there anything peculiar about utterances functioning as parts of literary variety of written discourse, in comparison with those of spoken one? No doubt, there is. The differences between the two can be referred to a) language competence and actual use of utterances, and b) to certain extra-linguistic points.

Linguistic peculiarities of utterances as literary discourse phenomena

These peculiarities are related mainly, though not only, to lexis, grammar and pragmatics. Written discourse in general, and its literary variety, in particular, lacks one of the fundamental properties characterizing spoken discourse –its momentary, instantaneous nature. In other words, literary discourse being so to say reverse, fixed in time and space tends to be stable and unchanged. ‘Reverse’ means that the author is able to change something in the text already written. So, this general property of literary discourse explains and motivates, to a certain extent, its linguistic peculiarities.

Utterances functioning within literary discourse (ULD) are relatively more complex, sometimes even complicated, grammatically and lexically, in comparison with those being units of spoken discourse. ULD are also marked with a frequent use of various
expressive means (stylistic devices), which belong to different levels of the language (phonetic, grammatical, lexical) making it poetical. At the same time, in spite of their complexity and what sometimes is called redundancy, ULD are evidently accurate. This feature is motivated by total absence of prosodic means (i.e., mimics, gestures, etc.) characterizing written discourse. It makes the author be very precise in terms of what he/she says, and how exactly he/she does it, as the author needs, first, to convey the main idea of the literary piece to the reader, and, second, to realize pragmatic components (i.e., to make each utterance reach the intended result corresponding to its purpose).

We would argue that such mutually exclusive features as complexity and redundancy, on the one hand, and accuracy and precision, on the other, successfully coexist within ULD distinguishing them from utterances functioning within spoken discourse.

**Extra-linguistic peculiarities of utterances as literary discourse phenomena**

The peculiarities of the kind are harder to identify and “measure” as they are related to the feature only essential to written narration, i.e. author’s presence in the discourse. Sharing Mark Bevir’s assumption that an author is “the person who first ascribes meaning to the relevant physical object” (2002: 493) we may state that it necessarily means specific time, space, plot structure, and the system of characters creating new discourse reality imposed by the author’s free will.

All these aspects fall within the scope of textual criticism—a branch of linguistics studying text interpretation. Though analyzed by linguists, these properties of literary discourse are better to be defined as extra-linguistic, in order to distinguish between them and ‘verbalized’ features stated in the previous section. One may say that the author uses linguistic means to create another reality, which starts existing separately from the reader and the person who imposed it.

Being once separated from its creator, determined and fixed, literary discourse seems to be unchangeable and frozen. It is not quite so. The way literary discourse is perceived depends on the person who is engaged in the process of its interpretation, a two-way process: people control texts, as well as texts control people. Here we come across what can be defined as overlapping of contexts. Backgrounds generally ascribed to literary discourse (social, historical, and cultural) are time-referred. Besides these more or less “readable and understandable” types of context, there exists much more vague personal background of the author. Textual backgrounds and the author’s personal background are combined with the reader’s personal context—that very feature changing the whole thing, and making literary discourse “a piece of my own”.

Therefore, utterances functioning within literary discourse can be approached multi-dimensionally. They are, at the same time, a) verbalized units, complex, sometimes even redundant but accurate and precise; b) units inseparably built in the structure of written discourse; c) units marked with overlapping of personal and general meanings and backgrounds: those of the author and the reader, those known by every language speaker, and those which exist beyond a piece of discourse. These features coupled with the lack of prosodic and paralinguistic markers relevant to spoken discourse make the
interpretation of narrated utterances more difficult and confusing, in comparison with that of spoken ones.

References