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Language and Literature: Discourse Analysis and the study of Literary Texts

Introduction

As a general term, discourse analysis is used for a number of approaches to analyzing language and texts. It looks at the linguistic basis of the text and at how interactional and interpersonal relations are signaled in the text; it studies the cohesive features of textual organization and unity, the overall 'frame' within which these features are placed and which contributes to 'coherence'. All these provide the contextual signals or 'links' which place the text within a specific socio-cultural and historical setting, and give it its particular orientation as discourse within the larger framework of social and cultural discourse. It is at various levels of discourse structure that the particular ideological orientation of the text makes itself evident.

This paper presents an overview of recent trends in discourse analysis and the implication of these for the study of literature. The time has now come when the earlier opposition between literature and linguistics, and that between literary language and ordinary language can safely be considered as untenable. In most of the works done by sociolinguists and discourse analysts- all those who have studied language-in-use and some literary critics of the seventies and eighties, we can see at last the hoped-for rapprochement between literary studies and language studies. The convergence of these areas can now be perceived as more tangible based as it is on the solid foundation of research into how language works in ordinary life as well as in specialized context, and how texts are produced and received.

This is the concern of discourse analysis – it is the study of discourse that make a significant change in the notion that the linguistic analysis of literature is a piecemeal and unnecessarily minute splitting up of



the work of literary art, reducing it, to the stringing together of isolated 'lexical items' or 'clauses'. Apologists for the application of linguistics in literature have stressed that linguistics is an 'aid' to the understanding of literature. It is of course far more than that. Language is integral to the formation of a literary text and to view the study of the language of such a text as an 'aid' is to destroy this integrity. But to retain this integrity, more has to be done than pick out the number of stressed syllables in a line, or the occurrence of certain kinds of clauses. It is in any case, imperative to analyze the linguistic structure in detail. The 'micro' linguistic items are the building blocks of the textual structure; it is their cumulation and positioning in the text in particular formation of clusters and convergences that give the text its particular meaning(s). And meanings has to be understood not as the sum of all these parts, but as something more – something that is inferred certain implicatures that are derived from the directions provided by the formal features in the text as well as the supra-sentential structure. 'Meaning' is thus to be understood in contextual terms: "how given grammatical structures come to have given meanings in given contexts and secondly how large textual or topical constraints affect deletion possibilities, the choice of individual lexical anaphoric or exophoric items, and so on, within a given clause" (Coulthard, 1975).

The state of art in the study of literary discourse

The works done in pragmatics during the sixties and seventies by theorists like Austin (1962) and Searle (1969, 1975) provided the first stimulus towards the consideration of literary texts not just as a collection of sentences, but as *utterances in context*. If language is a form of action, and if we distinguish between what is *said* and what is *done* in the uttering of a sentence, it follows then that a literary text is also an utterance performing a function or functions within a context. The text in turn is composed of utterances and these too, are functional within the textual context in specific ways which can be analyzed. For instance a sentence in a text may 'say' one thing, yet the 'meaning' of that sentence may be understood as quite the opposite of what the sentence 'says'. It is clear that while the sentence structure leads us to understand one meaning-that which is stated, the sentence is *doing* something else which leads us to understand another meaning. This 'doing' is what Austin calls the 'illocutionary force' as distinguished from the logical 'sense'. Grice (1975) in his theory of implicature discusses how 'meaning' is arrived at by deriving "implicatures" which result when the maxims of relevance, truth and economy are deliberately flouted in a communicative act. Wilson and Sperber (1986) have applied the notion of relevance in particular, to understand the operation of effects such as metaphor and irony in literature. Grice's theory is also important for literature as it is less restricting than Searle's



categorizations and offers a way out from considering language behavior as 'rule bound' to explaining how it escapes from such rule-governance. As one utterance may have more than one 'force' or 'forces', it is logical that some of these will be indirect, and indirect illocutions give rise to implicatures because they violate the maxims of relevance, truth, etc. (Pratt, 1976; Leech, 1983).

In addition to this idea of language as performance, Halliday's explanation of the functions of language: the ideational, interpersonal and textual, has enabled the study of the functionality of features in a literary text in a more explicit way. Halliday's important and widely-anthologized essay (1971) on Golding's novel 'The Inheritors' studies the presentation of a particular world-view expressed in specific transitivity relations at the clause structure level (transitivity being the grammaticalisation of process and participant relations in a clause). This is an instance how language is ideationally functional in a given context. Carrying these ideas forward, Sinclair (1978), Widdowson (1984), Fowler (1983, 1986) and Leech (1983) have in their analysis of individual texts (poetry and prose) argued the case for the consideration of interpersonal roles and relations stated or implied in the text (e.g. the author, the personae, the implied reader(s) etc.), that realize the text's interpersonal function. Further, as discussed at length by Halliday and Hasan (1978) it is the cohesive structure of a text that realizes its textual function as organized discourse. And though the textual function is the one which is most clearly recognizable in the literary discourse, the language of literary text is simultaneously performing the other functions as well. In fact the three major functions defined by Halliday are closely and mutually interrelated in the language of a literary text. Thus for instance, cohesive features such as pro-nominals function to create text in linking sentences and also perform in interpersonal function of defining speaker's role within the textual structure (Brown and Gilman, 1972). That role in turn or turns is reflective of certain types of roles and actions which are socially significant in a given culture. The speaker's role within a given discourse might conform to these recognized social roles or might oppose and challenge them. It is this kind of analysis which would support the conclusion that a text is ideologically constituted to make certain kinds of statements or transport meanings of particular social, cultural and political value.

This pragmatic approach and socio-functional approach in the analysis of discourse have helped to explain language in every day social interaction as well as in literature. In fact the distinction between the two kinds of language is not a matter of debate – the language of literature is but a carrying over of the language of communication in contexts of social discourse. Like everyday language, literary language too is used with certain communicative goals in view. That is, the writer wants to achieve certain goals –



to express a point of view, to create certain effects, and so on. Often these goals are achieved simultaneously through one piece of writing (or speech). As Leech shows in his analysis of Johnson's "Celebrated Letter to Lord Chesterfield" (Leech, 1983), one piece of prose i.e. the letter, is used by Johnson to achieve three goals: the goal of civility (maintaining politeness according to norms of civilized society), the practical goal (of castigating Chesterfield), and the aesthetic goal (of producing a 'cleverly parallelistic and climatic use of language'). Thus literary objectives are combined with non-literary objectives. Johnson's letter had its purpose in the real circumstances of his life and is at the same time a work of art.

The same cannot be said to be true in a uniform way about all literary works, but the multifunctional use of language is made clear by the above illustration. We can thus broadly define three kinds of orientation in a literary text, conforming (again broadly) to Haliday's three functions:

(i) The autonomous orientation: In this, the text is oriented toward itself, distanced from the real world of social interaction – the verbal artifact (as Jakobson, the 'new' critics etc., have defined). Here the important thing is how the language functions *textually*, enabling the text 'to stand on its own'.

(ii) The social orientation: This is the purpose of the text vis a vis the social and historical circumstances in which it is produced. The factors of its production include the effect that the writer wants to achieve in the *society* – does he/she want it to be accepted, to be argued over, to be criticized, to be socially effective – in short, the way the writer wants the text to be understood is reflected in the presentation of a world view(s), on ideology(ies). The meanings that the text projects will therefore always have an ideological orientation, dependent upon the social, cultural and historical framework within which the text is produced. Here, language functions *ideationally* to express and create meaning(s).

(iii) The affective orientation: This is the orientation of the text towards the reader or vice versa; all interactional possibilities that are created in the text, that affect responses in individual readers. These responses maybe similar for many readers, or contrary, depending upon the kind of attitude and point of view that the writer has towards his/her audience and the kind of awareness/background that the reader has towards



the text. Here the language functions to create *inter-personality* where the reader is engaged in goal- directed activity i.e. interpreting meaning.

While these functional, pragmatic and goal- oriented views of language have cleared up and reconciled certain oppositions as those of literary language vs. everyday language, literature as – art and literature – in society, they have also brought about changes in methods of analyzing literature; obviously if we no longer view literary text as an end-in-itself. If literature is goal-oriented, our analysis of it must also be so. Not only the text, but observation of the text is located within what Burton calls ‘a constructed theoretical framework of socially, ideologically and linguistically constructed reality, whether the observer/describer of observation is articulately aware of that framework or not (1982, 209). According to Burton, analysis of a literary text involved understanding the fictional reality of the text and by this, the ‘constituent parts of the fictions we live *in* and *by*’. This recognition may then enable us to even *rewrite* those fictions, making discourse analysis goal-oriented i.e. oriented not only towards interpretation, but also reconstruction.

A ‘contextual’ approach to literary texts: problems and methods

From the foregoing discussion, it is apparent that we must proceed to the analysis of literary discourse with a clear perception of the purposes and effects of such analysis. Like art criticism and/or analysis cannot be autotelic. Such awareness prompts what may be called a ‘contextual’ approach to literary texts, as apposed to purely ‘formal’ stylistics on one hand, and rigid discourse analysis such as that of Sinclair and Culthard on the other. We are, of course, in a continuous area: theories on either side argue that discarding formal method leads to lack of analytical rigor. General paradigms are hard to set in the case of literary discourse, characterized as it by unpredictability and unfamiliarity (but see discussion in 4ii below). For instance when some pragmaticists such as Levin (1967) try to specify the overarching speech act in defining ‘what kind of speech act a poem is’ , they run the risks both of over-generalizing and of not explaining enough about the multi-faceted nature of implications in a poem. We can therefore conclude that speech act theory in itself is of limited value in accounting for the total contextual significance of a work of literary art, unless it is incorporated within a more comprehensive analysis of the discourse structure of the text. Merely tabling the number of speech acts in a poem would be as inadequate as merely tabling the number of clauses and adjectives.



In the case of formal features and perhaps even more so in the case of pragmatic features, we have to recognize that the perception of what is meaningful or significant is constrained by the readers' awareness of the certain modes of expression in certain given contexts. While the perception of significance is related to both psychological and sociological factors, it is the latter which can be more clearly and systematically traced. Or at least, we can attempt to do so, as the task of tracing – culturally and socially determining factors in relation to literary texts is not an easy one. We know that correlations between social forces and literature are not explicit or straightforward, but we also know that literature cannot exist outside these social constraints. The latter are mediated in innumerable ways by the language of literary discourse, and it is the nature of this mediation that constitutes the unique comment or signification of the text – how each text manages to say something different even when rooted in a commonality of experience.

Therefore a contextual approach to literary discourse must necessarily be broad enough to employ and integrate several methods of analysis, specifying links between strictly formal features (grammatical and cohesive) and the pragmatic inferences derived from them, then the links between both these culturally defined and understood forms of linguistic expression. These links form the mediating chain of the textual context and the extra-textual world, in such a way that the two overlap and interact. Since both are contextual constructs an interchange of meaning or what we can call 'context transference' occurs.

Methodologically, we start from analyzing linguistic features in the text, such as the order of items in sentences, noting such phenomena as topicalization, passivization, agent deletion, nominalization, transitivity, lexicalization and modality; taking into account inter-sentential features such as pronominalization, co-ordination, ellipsis and substitution. These are features that are present in any textual structure, whether it is a newspaper report, poem or spoken dialogue. In literary discourse, there may be additional and 'abnormal' regularities or conscious patternings, which serve to emphasize and reinforce the effect of the linguistic features that are patterned thus. Given that the choice of these features and their subsequent emphasis is situationally constrained, we then explore the implications of the choices in:

- (a) Global textual terms, i.e. in terms of how they 'fit in' with the rest of the text, and by doing so, construct the 'reality' of the text.
- (b) Situational terms, i.e. in terms of how the 'reality' constructed by the choice reflects a particular social/cultural orientation through the meanings stated/implied in the



discourse – whether the choices operate to construct a reality that conforms to a recognized and established, or ‘dominant’ world view, or to subvert it.

At both levels, we also have to take into consideration the fact that the choices made are selected out of a range of options available to the writer, by implications it means that certain choices have been *omitted*; and these omissions may also be significant. Thus, for example, it is not only cohesion which defines textual structure, but absence of cohesion at certain points generates meanings which might even contradict the meanings created by the cohesive features. The gaps and absences in the structure of the text contribute to the way the text is received and understood by its audience, and are also the means by which alternative significations can be achieved.

Implications of the contextual approach

The approach and methods outlined above advance the argument that the ‘discourse analysis’ of literary texts is an extension of conventional ‘literary stylistics’. It directs the activity of formally explaining the linguistic basis of a literary text towards more meaningful goals. These goals can be visualized as:

(i) ‘extra-literary’ in that we are using explication of the text towards an understanding of language in society, language and mind, language and culture. Focusing on the many and complex links between text and context, we may perhaps not only understand the divergent ‘realities’ which are thus manifest, but also change them, - rewrite and reconstruct them – as we are all participants in the process of social and historical change (Burton,1982).

(ii) ‘Literary’ in that the textual construct is linked to other textual constructs and can be understood in relation to these. Different researchs in reader reception theory (Iser, 1968; Dhillon, 1978; 1982; Van Dijk, 1985) have developed our understanding of how discourse is organized into ‘schemes’, ‘frames’, and ‘scenarios’ and how readers approach literary texts according to the ‘frames’ that already exist in their knowledge about the organization and coherence of these texts. Literary genres, for instance, can be seen as ‘frames’ or schemata which are essential and obligatory in the construction of a text. They are the ‘rely points’ (Todorov 1977) from which ideas are transmitted as they provide a familiar perspective, a common frame of reference. Thus while ‘defamiliarisation’ is important, the recognition of the known and familiar is another



source of pleasure and understanding. In fact, the latter is what makes defamiliarisation possible, allowing us to say the unsayable (shklovsky, 1965). But genres are deployed in very many ways in a literary work – as over arching structure or as subversive, ironic commentary, - and different genres deployed in one text set up an interactive pattern of expectation and response. Thus they continue a dialogue with preceding texts (Bakhtin / Volosinov, 1983) in taking up the generic ‘code’ of those texts (Hirsch 1967). Discourse analysis, in this sense is genre analysis, aimed at uncovering the underlying forms that give coherence to a text and place it within a literary-historical framework. It is also aimed at defining the emergence of new forms and traditions, as in the case of post-modernist and post-colonial literature.

For literary criticism, all this has clear implications. Traditional literary critical pursuits which depend upon pre-conceived notions of ‘value’ in literature are about as defunct as the formalist and old ‘new critical’ approaches. Deconstruction has played a role in this twin destruction of literary and linguistic establishments. There is no contradiction however between textual analysis and deconstruction. Deconstruction is a textual strategy. We use the same tools that we use to construct reality, to dismember it. Thus, when we expand the scope of linguistic enquiry to include not just an account of language as structure, but language as an interplay of structure and silence (or ‘presence’ and ‘absence’, as Derrida would have it), we are taking the ‘deconstructive turn’. Linguistic analysis such as that of Halliday, Leech, Fowler and others does not therefore belong to another and different tradition but is the very basis that leads us to take up the deconstructive process. Gricean modes of analyzing the structure of inference and implicature take us to the point where we can also analyze the hidden structure or sub-levels of the same.

Conclusion

Thus it becomes imperative to consider not only the features that contribute to the aesthetic unity and success of a literary text, but the fissures or gaps in that ‘unity’, that leads to the text being read differently, or ‘misread’. When ‘mainstream’ linguistics and pragmatics use their knowledge of *how* language works to investigate *why* it works when it does and why it breaks down, they move beyond consideration of the isolated utterance or text to the extra-textual world of society and culture, where communication is never easy and unproblematic. When we look at human communication, we find that there is not only cross-cultural variation but even within one cultural paradigm, there are shifting conceptualizations of race, class, gender and literacy. As no culture or language is a stable and



homogenous whole, it follows that no literacy text and no analysis of a literary text can be objective and whole. It is essential as analysts, to deconstruct our own viewpoint, to discover what we have been missing all along and then perhaps we can come close enough to an 'analytical synthesis' that might lead to a greater, more radical reconstruction.

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