A modest proposal:
Linguistics and literary studies

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Linguistics should make significant contributions to literary and critical theory, but has failed to do so. This paper investigates the reasons for the failure and suggests an approach based in Relevance Theory for a working relationship between literary studies and pragmatics. Literary critics have misappropriated linguistic terminology and theories, because their model of language is outdated, and because they blur the distinction between scientific theories and *interpretive frameworks* — contexts in which assumptions are highly salient. Following an outline of Relevance Theory, an application of relevance stylistics demonstrates the distinctions between theories and interpretive frameworks, and how they can reinforce one another.

La linguistique devrait apporter une contribution significative aux théories littéraires et critiques, or cela ne s'est pas toujours produit. Cet article examine les causes d'un tel échec et suggère une approche fondée sur la théorie de la pertinence (« Relevance Theory ») pour rendre compte des relations entre études littéraires et pragmatiques. Les critiques littéraires ont mal employé la terminologie des théories linguistiques car ils se réfèrent à un modèle de langue démodé, et ils ne distinguent pas entre les théories scientifiques et les *cadres interprétatifs* — contextes dans lesquels les ensembles de suppositions sont fortement saillants. Après un résumé de la théorie de la pertinence, on présente une application stylistique de cette théorie à l'interprétation d'un poéme afin d'illustrer la distinction entre les théories et les cadres interprétatifs, ainsi que leur renforcement mutuel.

Introduction

Though both linguistics and literary theory deal with language, they do so at different ends of production, so to speak. We might expect that there would be a fruitful working relationship between them, but every hopeful beginning has ended in ruin. And yet there remains the deep conviction, particularly on the part of linguists who work in literary studies (such as Fabb, 2002, 2004), that failure is not inevitable, that a way can be found to draw these two disciplines,

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so intimately concerned with language, together in a mutually reinforcing fashion. Linguistic stylistics has brought linguistics into the realm of the analysis and interpretation of literature, through work by Leech (1969), Leech and Short (1981) and Short (1989). Recent research, however, is moving towards cognitive stylistics (Culpeper and Semino, 2002). Literary linguistics is still regarded as secondary, parasitic or superfluous. Indeed, a renowned and respected theorist, such as Roland Barthes, seriously (or at least half-seriously) could propose that:

> ... those who carry on literary analysis must sometimes demand a linguistics which does not exist. It is their role to determine, to a certain degree, the need for a linguistics which does not exist. ... Literary analysis will need a change in linguistics. I insist on this kind of methodological relationship; literary semiotics cannot be considered as simply a follower and a parasite of linguistics. (Roland Barthes, reply to "Linguistics and Poetics", Macksey and Donato, 1970, pp. 316–317)

In this paper, *linguistics* refers broadly to generative linguistics as developed by Chomsky. It is the theoretical model generally accepted by Relevance Theory, the approach adopted in this paper. In their "Reply to Rajagopalan", Wilson and Sperber (2005) remark that "We are among the few pragmatists who have been directly influenced by Chomsky's overall view of language and cognition, but Relevance Theory is not the working out of some non-existent Chomskyan programme for pragmatics, nor is it intrinsically committed to any particular view of grammar" (p. 100). Researchers who apply Relevance Theory to the interpretation and analysis of literature do so from the standpoint of a model of language accepted by most linguists.

Linguistics has long been ransacked by critics and theorists of literature: Saussure's phonological descriptions became *binary oppositions* (Fogarty, 2005) in structuralism and post-structuralism.[1] Transformational grammar surfaced as the narratological claim that innate or cultural structures *generate* narratives.[2] Despite the optimism of the 1958 Conference on Style in Indiana, where participants looked forward to cross-disciplinary work "between literary criticism, linguistics, psychology, and cultural anthropology" (Durant and Fabb, 1990, p. 36), the history of the twentieth century with respect to this partnership has been marked by utter failure.

The problem, according to many literary critics, is with linguistics. But if we look at the question which critics expected linguistics would answer, it becomes clear that the real difficulty is a category error. Literary and critical theorists did not ask *How can linguistics shed light on the structures and interpretation of texts?* but rather *How can linguistics produce fresh new readings of literary texts?* At first blush, the question is not obviously misconceived. However, this criterion — the production of fresh readings — will not work

for sociolinguistics or pragmatics any more than it will for phonology. Yet it was precisely this standard which literary theorists applied to the contributions of linguistics. Indeed, this criterion is the one which relevance stylistics—the approach advocated in this paper—is supposed to have failed to meet. MacMahon (1999, p. 56) writes that "Toolan berates relevance theory for not helping us to decide on Salman Rushdie's intentions in *Satanic Verses* or to 'adjudicate between interpretations'" generally. This sounds worryingly like Green's (1997) implication that Relevance Theory should produce new and interesting readings of literary texts. Neither function was ever intended for Relevance Theory. When linguistics failed to provide new interpretations, literary theorists felt justified in criticising the linguistic model, or in dismissing the possibility of cross-disciplinary work.[3]

As I will argue in this paper, such a question represents a grave error arising out of a misunderstanding of the nature and role of theory in the sciences, and the appropriation of extra-disciplinary terms and frameworks by literary studies. We can establish the basis for a productive relationship between linguistics and literary studies by re-examining the linguistic model which motivates literary theories about the text, and the content of the term *theory* in literary studies.

Kinds of theory

Linguistic theories are scientific theories. Literary theories are not. Indeed, as Durant and Fabb (1990, p. 182) point out, a theory can be "not strictly true" and still be useful. Scientific theories must meet criteria of falsifiability and reproducibility; literary and critical theories typically must meet second-order criteria of productivity, parsimony and exhaustivity.[4] Such second-order criteria are among the tests used to distinguish among theories in the sciences generally.[5] Furlong (1996, 2002) proposed variations of these principles as criteria by which to evaluate *literary* or non-spontaneous interpretation of texts.

These two kinds of *theorising*—scientific and *interpretive*—do not refer to identical activities. Ultimately, the kinds of theories which are used in literary criticism (developed from semiological analysis or from critical theories which are statements about the world) cannot explain the phenomenon of literary interpretation, partly because they rest on a flawed model of language, and partly because they are not theories about language at all. The misuse of the term *theory* in literary studies—applying not just to claims about literature, but to a range of critical theories drawn from a range of fields—has led to a widely-held conviction among critics that what is called theoretical work in literary and cultural studies amounts to "banal punditry and pseudo-quantitative comparisons" occurring in "the spooky Bermuda triangle that lies between Marx, Freud and Saussure" (Griffiths, 2003, p. 8). Knapp and Pence

(2003) trace the history of "the death of theory" in their introduction to the first of two special issues of *Poetics Today* (24.4, 25.1) that grapple with the state of current critical theory, concluding that reports of the demise of theory, like that of the author, may be premature.

I propose that by re-evaluating the model of language widely adopted by literary studies, and by recognising the different values of descriptive and interpretive theories in literary studies, we can discover the grounds for a renewed partnership between biological-cognitive linguistics and literary studies. Specifically, Relevance Theory, developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1995), can be used as a methodological tool which will help produce richer and stronger analyses of the kinds of interpretations which it is the business of literary studies to provide. Relevance Theory can serve as a vehicle for meta-critique, a systematic account of *how* a reader decides "what is meant" by a text. Regardless of the cultural theory adopted, Relevance Theory supplies an insight into the process of interpretation which allows readers and theorists to argue fruitfully about their interpretations, and to understand the bases of their conclusions.

Linguistics is a powerful tool in the interpretation of texts, though of itself it does not generate new readings. Rather, linguistics in general and pragmatics in particular provide a theoretical framework within which to describe and explain interpretive behaviour through an account of the function and construction of context. It seems incontestable that a knowledge of linguistics is indispensable for a deep understanding not only of the structure, but of the effects of literary works. The linguistic account of the medium of language does not exhaust its artistic possibilities; and though linguistics will not produce new readings of texts (unless they are texts about linguistics), it can add profoundly to our experience and understanding of literature.

I begin by explaining the difficulties arising out of the choice of linguistic model that literary theory has made. From there, I discuss the distinction between scientific theory and *interpretive frameworks* (theories about literature). Following this discussion, I provide an overview of Relevance Theory, and demonstrate how Relevance Theory deals with context in interpretation. To demonstrate how Relevance Theory can be used in critical literary study, I explicate a linguistic context for the interpretation of Dora Greenwell's (1996) poem *Scherzo* (see Appendix), focussing on its phonological features, and argue that this application of linguistics to interpretation reveals aspects of the poem that significantly enrich our understanding of it. I conclude with some remarks about the prospects for further application of Relevance Theory to literary studies.

Language and literature

There is a considerable body of literature issuing from theorists operating within an applied linguistics framework who focus on, for example, the evidence of ideology in texts[6] and its effect on the interpretation of these texts. This socio-pragmatics might have been assumed to have had a greater impact on literary studies. However, the work of these writers is often highly technical and thus inaccessible to the average student of literature with no background in applied linguistics, pragmatics, or philosophy of language. Students can take in their conclusions without understanding how they were arrived at. Consequently, the student of literature is likely to confuse the term "theory" with "hypothesis", or to accede to the view of theory put forward by Eagleton (1983, p. 197):

> Any attempt to define literary theory in terms of a distinctive method is doomed to failure. ... [Its] methods have more in common with other "disciplines" — linguistics, history, sociology and so on — than they have with each other. Methodologically speaking, literary theory is a non-subject.

This was Eagleton's position in 1983, in his *Literary theory: An introduction*. While literary and critical theories have developed considerably in the twenty years since then, the assumptions about theory and about language that underpin this statement have not substantially changed. Literary interpretations that make use of the terms and approaches of other disciplines, such as psychology, sociology or linguistics, are called *theoretical*. The approach called *postmodernism* claims that any of these choices is as good as any other, and that situational considerations will determine whether one subjects a text to a feminist, postcolonial, structuralist or psychoanalytical reading. Lodge (2004) refers to this behaviour as "a kind of hedonistic pick 'n mix browsing in the cultural shopping mall of ideas and experiences, depriving even ostensibly progressive projects like postcolonialism of practical effect and moral purpose" (p. 40). Contemporary theoretical practice thus takes Eagleton's description to its logical conclusion: there is no literature, only texts; there is no theory, only methods.

When literary studies assimilates theoretical structures without understanding the discipline in which these theories operate, the result sheds less light on the work than on the reader. Furthermore, for all their theoretical apparatus, these readings do not and cannot explain literary interpretation. Literary studies, being concerned with texts which are written out of and about human experience, can legitimately make use of a wide range of critical theories and interpretive strategies; but it must also be cognizant of the nature and limitations of critical theory, and of the flaws of a semiological-functionalist model of language.

Models of language

It might seem quixotic to attempt to bring together two such different ways of seeing the world as literary theory and linguistics. Scientists value systematicity, prediction, fact and reproducibility. Humanists value intuition, insight and uniqueness. And while those working in the humanities fear the reductivism of science, social scientists are appalled by the anarchic individualism of belle-lettrists. Yet literary studies in the twentieth century and the development of critical theory in literary studies grew out of, the deep desire among literary critics to bring the clarity of the scientific enterprise to the disarray of literary studies. This project tapped into, and in some measure grew out, of a tradition in literary criticism that united the rigour of analysis (often indebted to philosophy) with the insights of the creative imagination. Eagleton describes the belief that informed Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, "that criticism was in a sorry unscientific mess and needed to be smartly tidied up. It was a matter of subjective value judgements and idle gossip, and badly required the discipline of an objective system" (1983, p. 91). Frye contended that "literature itself formed such a system" (p. 91), but this "liberal humanist tradition" was still mired in the belief of the worth of certain values — rightly characterised by Eagleton as "middle-class liberal values" (p. 94) — as expressed in literary texts. The inescapable conclusion was that, if literary studies was incapable of putting the study of literary texts on a systematic basis, then that system had to be sought in the social and physical sciences.

The most likely place to begin, especially during the early decades of the twentieth century, was linguistics, then evolving out of nineteenth-century philology. The model of language developed during that period was rooted in the semiology of Saussure, and led to swift developments in phonology. The Saussurean model was also the basis, ultimately, for literary structuralism and post-structuralism. Its vestiges can still be seen in aspects of Lacanian psychoanalytic criticism, deconstruction and various cultural theories. The assumption that every element in a system implies the existence of a contrastive element derives from a semiological view of systems as being constructed around oppositional units. So, for example, Lacanian criticism may argue that human beings exist within a "reality" constructed by language and marked by successive senses of loss or exclusion. This reality, being linguistic, consists of terms and notions defined by their opposite. Deconstructive criticism may claim that terms get their values only by their difference from other terms (see Durant and Fabb, 1990, pp. 31–46). And postcolonialism may focus exclusively on the ways in which hegemonic groups dominate by excluding (or silencing) powerless groups; here, too, an unstated but fundamental opposition defines the system.

Jonathan Culler, writing in 1975, when this trend was peaking, explicitly tied structuralism to linguistics:

> Indeed the relations that are the most important in structural analysis are the simplest: binary oppositions. Whatever else the linguistic model may have done, it has undoubtedly encouraged structuralists to think in binary terms, to look for functional oppositions in whatever material they are studying. (1975, p. 14)

Stephen Bonnycastle (1996), in his discussion of narratology, describes its "focus on general (and perhaps universal) patterns in the structure of plots", and refers to Greimas' system, in which "narratives contain six roles that form three pairs", arranged as opposites: subject and object, sender and receiver, helper and opponent (p. 159). But the practice did not begin in the 1960s; Russian Formalism took shape at precisely the time when Saussure's students were gathering the notes that would become the General Course, and took "the scientific study of literature" as its aim (Fokkema and Ibsch, 1978, p. 11). Indeed, the development of much literary and critical theory at the time was driven by the conviction that literary studies could and should be rationalised by projecting them onto the framework provided by the scientific study of the medium of literature.

All these critical theories are intellectually indebted to a semiological-functionalist model of language. The semiological model was challenged by Chomsky (1965), and while the Chomskyan model of language transformed the practices and theories of linguistics over the next half-century — even of those linguists who rejected it — it was neither understood nor adopted by literary theorists. Instead, most literary theories continue to assume that the semiological model of language and the code model of communication are accurate, current and valid. Since this is not the case, literary studies has been unable to incorporate current research in linguistics in any meaningful, consistent way for nearly forty years.

It hasn't been for lack of trying. However, each attempt has ended in failure because literary theorists have not understood the difference between scientific theories and interpretive theories — that is, between "a hypothesis … held as an explanation of a group of facts or phenomena and how they are caused which also makes predictions about cases" not already examined, and a "system of interconnecting ideas or statements held as an explanation or account of a group of phenomena" (Durant and Fabb, 1990, p. 174). The key distinction between them is that the former, to be considered a scientific theory, must undergo tests of falsifiability and reproducibility.

Linguistics has not been the only science or social science pillaged by critical theorists; theoretical physics, psychoanalysis and economics have all taken their turn. But the peculiar and enduring attraction of linguistics lay in

the fact that it is the only discipline to deal exclusively with the very stuff of literature: language. Consequently, linguistics has fared especially badly and all critical theories based on the linguistic model have distorted what they have appropriated. Not surprisingly, every critical theory based on linguistics has been discredited. It is not obvious, however, that failure is thus inevitable.

Part of the problem is that we are dealing with two very different concepts of the term *theory*. In the sciences, a theory is an explanatory model; in literary studies, it is an interpretive framework. The distinction between these is not superficial, and conflating them has proved fatal to virtually all attempts to use the processes, discoveries, methods and approaches of linguistics to the analysis of literature.

Explanatory models and interpretive frameworks

To make it easier to distinguish between these two kinds of theory, I propose to reserve the term *theory* in this paper for scientific theories, which are falsifiable and whose output is reproducible. For *theory* within the discipline of literary studies, I propose the term *interpretive framework*.

An interpretive framework is a cohesive set of assumptions about the world; it makes certain aspects of the text highly salient by restricting the context in which it is processed. So long as readers accept the assumptions in this context as true or probably true, they will regard the interpretations that result as fruitful or interesting. If the assumptions of the framework are rejected ("the earth is flat"), then readers will reject the reading because it conflicts with their understanding of the world. Interpretive frameworks thus produce readings that validate or verify the claims of that framework, as well as illuminating the text itself. While interpretive frameworks may draw attention to the core set of assumptions that comprise the framework, they are also self-reinforcing and culturally specific.

So, for instance, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, resting as it does on claims about the world (i.e., an account of the development of the human psyche), is an interpretive framework. It makes manifest a set of assumptions in a given text; these are derived from a context in which the premise that there is no direct apprehension of reality outside language is so strongly manifest that it is a factor in the interpretation of each section of text. Feminist theory rests on claims about the relationship between women, men and power. A feminist reading of a text will produce a reading in which observations about the relationships between men and women, and the power dynamics in a relationship or a society, will be so strongly manifest as to affect every part of the reading.

Thus, a feminist reading of Dickens' *Great Expectations* may point out that Estella and Miss Haversham are not only mirror images of one another, but are also projections of mid-Victorian anxieties about female sexuality and

independence. This reading allows us to look at the novel not just as a classic *Bildungsroman*, tracing the development of the male protagonist, but also as an exploration of the failure of the feminine to sustain spiritual development in an independent position. Dickens' novel is crucially concerned with the moral and spiritual independence of Pip, the central character; therefore, Estella's (and Miss Haversham's, and Biddy's) failure to become whole human beings may suggest that women who step out of their "proper place" cannot attain maturity, because they have abandoned their fundamental role as nurturers and supporters of male growth. Such a reading follows naturally from some of the basic assumptions of feminist theory.

However, we should note that such readings also provide evidence in support of the theories which generated them. A critic operating within the set of assumptions about the world which feminist and gender theory accepts and makes salient can now use the interpretation he produced to argue for the usefulness and validity of the theory he has used.[7] He can use the interpretation of *Great Expectations* which a feminist reading has produced in order to argue that, indeed, nineteenth-century culture in general and Dickens in particular acted on assumptions about women and gender that maintained structures of oppression. Interpretive frameworks may thus draw attention to the core set of assumptions that comprise the literary work, but they are *self*-reinforcing and culturally specific. The tautological nature of this relationship differs fundamentally from the process underlying the testing of hypotheses or explanatory theories, where models are confirmed or disconfirmed using evidence that has not been generated by the model or theory in question.[8]

There is a second kind of interpretive framework: these are theories about language itself, and they include those theories which most explicitly attempt to incorporate the terms, methods, models and approaches of linguistics. Barthes' *S/Z* (1974), for example, is as close as anyone has ever come to a thorough, faithful, sustained structuralist reading outside a dissertation or an asylum, and it is both too much and too little. Barthes is a clever, responsive reader, and he shows how the style of the text both conveys the story of a sculptor (Sarrazine) deceived by a castrato (Zambinella), and insinuates the sexual uncertainty that lies at the heart of the story. Here, as in other interpretations produced by (non-linguistic) theories about language, the reading becomes less about whatever it was the writer wanted to communicate, and more about the theory's assumptions about language and interpretation. While most readers who persevere will agree that the interpretive framework or critical theory Barthes creates from the precepts of structuralism produces a consistent reading, they will also feel that it's somehow all "beside the point". Since Balzac didn't write *Sarrazine* as a model for structuralist analysis, this impression is hardly surprising. Furthermore, Barthes' assumptions about the phenomenon of language and the

discipline of linguistics turned out to be false, and so his interpretive framework has fallen out of favour, because it is not productive.

Every interpretive framework based on theories of language — especially linguistic theories — has failed. The "intellectual bankruptcy" of these approaches (Sperber and Wilson, 1995, p. 7) reflects the fact that the domain of linguistics has not been understood or respected by many of the critical theorists who have adopted the procedures, terminology and models of linguistics. The sole criterion that does not pertain to the linguistic analysis of literary texts — the production of fresh readings — was precisely the one which literary theorists applied to the contributions of linguistics.

The development of pragmatics offered the promise of a more fruitful theoretical relationship between linguistics and literature. Pragmatics, dealing as it does with the interpretation of texts, ought to provide a theoretical framework that will supply literary and critical theorists with interesting insights into the texts and their interpretations. But this hasn't happened; pragmatic readings of literary texts have turned out to be as unproductive as those of previous applications of linguistics. Some critics have therefore suggested that literary works cannot be served by linguistics, that literary works are resistant to linguistics and to *pragma-stylistics* (Green, 1997, p. 136).

The confusion arises out of the nature of interpretive frameworks. These, like pragmatics, are ultimately concerned with questions of context. But because, as we have seen, interpretive frameworks are under no obligation to examine the context they make salient, but instead generate the evidence which supports their claims about the world, they cannot illuminate the role of context in interpretation. What is needed is a way to bring the insights of critical theory — which are, in the end, insights about the context in which a work is produced, or read — within an explanatory model of the way that context operates in interpretation. I propose to apply Relevance Theory in order to demonstrate how linguistics and literary studies can benefit from one another.

Relevance Theory is centrally concerned with the role of context in which interpretations are made, and so allows for a productive relationship between literary studies and linguistics. While Relevance Theory will never in itself generate a new reading of a literary work — because linguistics is not about the world, but about language — it can shed light on the process of reading, on the criteria for interpretation and on the role of intention in literature. Relevance Theory provides a description of interpretive frameworks that is principled and motivated, and consistent with the programme of linguistics.

Relevance Theory: An overview

When a student claims that Housman's poem *To An Athlete, Dying Young* is about an old man looking back on the glories of his youth, we reject his reading. The fact that we make this judgment indicates that we recognise the writer is trying to convey some meaning, and that we have a criterion for deciding what it is. Relevance Theory is a theory about this criterion, and an explanatory hypothesis about the nature, use and workings of context; it derives from a small set of fundamental assumptions about cognition and communication.

Every utterance has a variety of possible interpretations, all compatible with the information that is linguistically encoded. However, not all of these occur to the reader simultaneously, for some take more effort to think up than others. Readers are equipped with a single, general, exceptionless criterion for evaluating interpretations as they occur. This criterion is powerful enough to exclude *all but at most a single interpretation*, so that having found one that satisfies it, the reader can stop, for *there is never more than one*. Perhaps no aspect of Relevance Theory has been so misunderstood within literary and critical studies as this last claim. To claim the uniqueness of an interpretation at any given point for any given reader is not to assert that a text has a single, unique meaning. Rather, since the interpretation of an utterance consists in fact of a set of assumptions, an interpretation may be said to comprehend many meanings held at varying degrees of strength or salience. All that is claimed here is that the constitution of this set of assumptions is uniquely determined at any given time by any given reader.

Relevance Theory claims that the writer produces a text (an utterance) which provides evidence for the set of assumptions (propositional and non-propositional — ideas, feelings, impressions and so forth) that she wants her reader to recognise *as having been intended by her*. The reader may or may not also accept these assumptions as true or probably true, and adjust his view of the world accordingly. Even if this does not happen, however, communication is by definition successful *if the reader recognises the interpretation the writer intended*. Thus, in Relevance Theory, there is always an intending author, there is always some responsibility on the reader's part for the construction of the interpretation, and there is always an intended interpretation. However, this account raises the question of what the term "intended interpretation" means, and how intention is connected with context.

The fundamental claim of Relevance Theory is that every aspect of communication and cognition is governed by the search for relevance. Relevance Theory makes a distinction between the relevance of a phenomenon, and the relevance of an utterance. The criterion for evaluating hypotheses about the interpretation of an utterance is the Second Principle of Relevance, which "states that every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of

its own optimal relevance" (Sperber and Wilson 1995, p. 266). The First and Second Principles of Relevance are spelled out in Sperber and Wilson (1995, pp. 255–279).

Every utterance starts out as a bid for the reader's attention, and so creates an *expectation of relevance*. The criterion for evaluating hypotheses about the utterance is built around this expectation. In communication, we have an *expectation of relevance* which is precise and powerful enough that if the reader finds an interpretation that satisfies that expectation, he can be sure it is the only one that will do so. This is not the same as claiming that it will always be correct — i.e., one that the writer had in mind. The reader may overlook what the writer thought would be obvious, or pick up on a hypothesis the writer had overlooked. It is therefore crucial that the reader identify the context in which the writer intended him to interpret her text.

Failure to correctly identify this context can lead to unacceptable interpretations. The last line of Seamus Heaney's poignant poem, *Mid-term Break*, very strongly implies the age of the speaker's brother, dead as the result of an accident:

> *A four foot box [coffin], a foot for every year.*

A student of mine arrived at the perfectly logical deduction that, had the child been five, he would have been laid out in a five-foot box (etc.). Heaney likely never foresaw this mischievous reading, which follows from the evidence of the text, but whose grotesque comedy negates — and is certainly inconsistent with — the pathos of the rest of the work. The student's conclusion shows that we have to distinguish between *implication* and *implicature*, and points out that context construction is not unconstrained.

Implications and implicatures: Context in interpretation

The difference between treating the text as an object and treating it as a communicative act is central to the distinction between *implications* and *implicatures*. A tree, for instance, or sheet lightning, is a phenomenon. In the search for relevance, an individual may process information about these things in a context and work out the implications of that information. The presence of a living tree strongly implies a supply of water; the appearance of sheet lightning strongly implies that it's high time to seek shelter. But none of these implications is in any way connected to communicative intentions on the part of the tree, or the lightning: they are simply deductions that result from processing the information in a context. There is no communicative act — the tree isn't trying to convey something by being there — only a phenomenon which the human being processes in the general cognitive search for relevance.

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A text, however, is different: it is of course an object in the world, and people may derive implications from its existence — such as the presence of literary agents — but it is first of all a communicative act. Consequently, it gives rise not just to *implications* but *implicatures*: implications which the reader may assume, with varying degrees of confidence, as having been intended by the writer to be recovered. Sperber and Wilson identify two kinds of contextual implications: contextual premises and contextual conclusions. The first are supplied by the reader in the construction of the intended context; the second are the result of inferences carried out in that context. These conclusions constitute the premises for the continued construction (or perhaps extension) of the context (see Sperber and Wilson, 1995, pp. 108–117, 142–151).

Texts are therefore *always* intentional, and are not treated as objects in the world, to be processed in a context entirely determined by the reader. (Of course they can be so treated, but then, according to Relevance Theory, the utterance is being treated as a phenomenon and not as communication.) The text provides evidence not just for the interpretation, but for the context which produces that interpretation.

This view of the function of context in the process of interpretation allows us to describe interpretive frameworks — especially those that rest on claims about the world, rather than claims about language or reading — within a principled theoretical framework. In constructing the context in which a text is read, the reader relies on the evidence explicitly provided by the text and by a wide range of other resources. These may include other works by the same author; the cultural and historical context in which the work was produced; biographical information about the author; other readers' interpretations; and so on. Thus the context in which we read the work may be indefinitely expanded. At the same time, it is also powerfully constrained. What acts as the basis for these constraints? Relevance Theory proposes that the context, like the interpretation, is intended by the communicator; the intended context is the one which will yield the intended interpretation. The evidence for the intended context is provided, like the evidence for the interpretation itself, by the writer in the text.

Now, interpretive frameworks are concerned with explicating contexts, and especially with making salient assumptions which have not been strongly manifest in the past. These assumptions may have been very weakly manifest — so weak, in fact, that they have never figured in the interpretation of a text — for any number of reasons; or they may have been more manifest at various times in the past, or to various groups of readers. So, for instance, the contextual premises that are made strongly manifest by feminist theory, such as the degree to which social structures and systems of thought have restricted the ability of women to act autonomously or publicly, may have always been *obvious* (i.e., highly manifest) to people sensitive to the connection between

society and its individuals. Or, contextual premises about the novelty of republican governments may have been more salient in the past, or in particular cultures — say, during the Golden Century in Holland — and have faded from general awareness since then. Finally, assumptions about the cosmos — such as that the sun, moon and stars revolve around the earth — might have been believed in the distant past, and disbelieved more recently.

In all these examples, critical theories act, not to produce readings of texts that will refute these assumptions, but to yield interpretations resulting precisely from making the assumptions strongly manifest. They therefore enact the kinds of cognitive activities described by Relevance Theory, and produce precisely the sort of readings that Relevance Theory predicts. To that immediate extent, then, Relevance Theory clearly can assist in the understanding of the production of interpretations by critical theories. But as a theory of pragmatics, grounded in linguistics, Relevance Theory can do far more: it allows also, and perhaps uniquely, for the incorporation of linguistic observations and models into the interpretation of texts and, crucially, helps account in part for the connection between language and experience.

Linguistics, context and literature

I will put forward my case for a working relationship between linguistics and literary studies within a relevance-theoretic framework by explicating a linguistic context for the interpretation of a poem. I want to show how a context — an interpretive framework — is constrained in part by the facts of the language in which the text is written, facts which can be used to produce fresh readings of a text, or to support or deepen existing readings. This is quite a different matter than applying linguistics wholesale to the interpretation of texts; and it differs again from using linguistic frameworks and models as the basis for critical theories. I will not describe my reading in detail, but I want to show how this approach might work.

Poetry differs from prose in important ways, some of which can be captured in linguistic representation. Where rhythmical and metrical patterns exist, linguistic description can make them salient in ways that traditional poetics cannot. A working knowledge of phonology can uncover patterns of sound which help produce the effect of those patterns. While not every poem will yield sufficient results to make such an analysis worthwhile, the effort is well worth it when it reveals sophisticated technical devices in apparently ordinary works.

A context that highlights some linguistic elements of Dora Greenwell's *A Scherzo* can affect the implicatures we derive. The *Scherzo* is sub-titled *A Shy Person's Wishes*, and the conjunction of the title and sub-title might lead the reader to infer that the poem is spoken by a shy person trapped at a social

function which is causing her distress of some sort. Up to line 17, we learn where she would like to be: with "the innermost heart of a peach", a "darkest summer pool", "the chink of an aged tree", a "chrysalis". From this line to line 27, however, these tiny, dark, secret places give way to "fire in the jagged thunder-cloud", "stones on some desolate highway", a "torrid lair". At line 28, with no punctuation to signal a shift, the first type of locale reappears — a "quiet loom" — followed by the heartfelt desire to be "anywhere" but where the speaker is now.

The dominant metre is anapestic tetrameter, a metre consisting of four units, in each of which two unstressed syllables are followed by a stressed syllable. The effect is of a brisk waltz time — appropriately enough, since a *scherzo* is a dance in quick triple time — strengthening the impression that the poem is set at a social occasion, such as a dance. However, a *scherzo* is also a light-hearted piece — the term comes from an Italian word for *joke* — but this poem is not light-hearted; instead, it expresses the pain of someone for whom casual social occasions may be a positive torment. The title and the poem seem to describe conflicting impressions of the speaker's state of mind. A focus on the rhyme suggests that both descriptions are accurate.

If we look at the vowels of the end-rhymes — ignoring the extrametrical unstressed syllables at the end of lines 20–25 — we notice that up to line 11, they are all tense vowels, and none is a low vowel. All the back vowels are followed by a lateral or voiced alveolar stop, shifting the sound to the front of the mouth and closing it off. From lines 12 to 17, the end-rhymes continue to incorporate tense vowels, but all occur in closed syllables (previously there has been a mixture of closed and open syllables). Indeed, lines 15–16 end in bilabial stops, which cut the sound off completely, particularly when, as in all these lines, they occur at the end of a phrase, at the end of a line and in a stressed syllable. Up to line 16, we have a series of syllables whose nuclei consist of high front vowels (made with the mouth relatively closed), and whose codas consist of voiced stops, none of which is made in the back of the mouth (and therefore also made with the mouth relatively closed). At line 17, however, the poem undergoes a shift in imagery, and a corresponding shift in the vowels of the end-rhymes.

From lines 17 to 27, all the vowels in the end-rhymes are rising diphthongs. Though none occurs in an open syllable, all produce a louder sound, and take longer to articulate than any of the preceding end-rhymes. And since the poem was written by a British speaker, a contemporary reader might not have produced the /r/ at the end of *lair* and *bear*, making these open syllables with diphthongs as their nuclei. The last two lines revert to the initial pattern, and consist of a tense high vowel followed by a bilabial nasal — an action that effectively shuts the speaker's mouth completely.

Application: Interpretation where a linguistic description is highly salient

This is a very rough description of what's going on in a very small part of the poem. Notice, though, how the sounds force the reader of the poem to mimic the repression which the reader may conclude the speaker is struggling with. The cumulative effects of the sounds suggest that "the shy person" of the poem's subtitle is not a docile, meek character. Someone who desires to join the tulip in its bulb may well be feeling small and miserable, but someone who wants to be with "things that are chainless, and tameless, and proud" is more likely to be harbouring resentment at being trapped. Alternatively, the speaker of the poem may herself identify with these "things", thus expressing her bedrock sense of herself as not insignificant, but powerful and potentially dangerous to those who are snubbing her, or relegating her to the position of wallflower. Or yet again, the entire monologue may be taking place within someone who is neither overlooked or denigrated, but who finds the entire social scene — which she has mastered — nevertheless unendurably tiring. Several similar readings can be supported by the evidence of the poem, and it is not necessary to decide among them, I suggest elsewhere (Furlong, 1996, 2002).

Given that the speaker is almost certainly female, and that the poem is mid-Victorian (when women were severely repressed socially), we may go on to imagine, regardless of which specific interpretation we adopt, that the speaker's fury is aimed at several targets: herself, for her shyness; her companions, for dragging her to this punishment; or the company, for simultaneously exposing and neglecting her, and thereby making her feel inadequate. While this conclusion leaps over the long chain of implicatures which contribute to this impression, it seems well-motivated, and the process can be explicated relatively easily.

In the context I have been developing — which includes not just linguistic description, but also cultural and historical information — these sound patterns support the conclusion that this is not a gentle, but rather a bitterly angry poem. The tension in the mouth, the closure of the jaw, imitate the clenched expression of a person who is not saying what she feels, but who is (perhaps literally) biting back what she thinks. As the poem continues, the speaker finds herself breaking out, giving voice — almost literally — to yowls of anguish and annoyance. The last two lines, with their reversion to tense vowels, and with their bilabial stops, suggest that she may have been noticed, and has retreated to her usual persona. They could almost be muttered, *sotto voce*, as she blends into the background once more.

A phonetic description, and a knowledge of English phonology, thus reinforce one reading of the poem, and demonstrate that evidence of the context in which the poem should be read can be found even at the level of sound and

rhythm. That this pattern of end-rhymes isn't requisite in English poetry — and therefore can be regarded as highly salient in this work — is confirmed by comparing it with another poem where structural elements contribute to the interpretation, such as, say, Tichborne's (1983) *Elegy*. Here the rhyme scheme is interesting, but far less so than the highly salient repetition of phrase and sentence structure, both within lines and within stanzas. This raises the possibility that other linguistic phenomena — such as phrase structures — can contribute to the context in which the whole text is read.

From a relevance-theoretic perspective, what has happened is that the poet has provided evidence for the interpretation which she intends her reader to recognise and entertain. Clearly, the linguistic evidence can be enriched to fully formed propositions which convey the major ideas of the poem. These propositions are the output of considerable inferential processing, if only because there is not a single independent clause in the entire piece. Every prepositional phrase or non-finite verb phrase designates a place (or a condition); none constitutes a sentence on its own. Hence, even the explicature "I wish I were with the wasp at the innermost heart of a peach" represents the endpoint of a complex sequence of inferences and enrichments.

However, it is the final phrase — "anywhere, anywhere, out of this room!" — which allows the reader to construct an interpretation in which the images and metaphors of the preceding 28 lines convey the speaker's desire to leave her present situation, rather than, say, express the desire to set out on an exploration of the natural world. With the evidence of this line, and the sub-title, the reader can construct a context through readily accessible assumptions about shy people, public occasions (such as dances) and easily imagined psychological states of mind. When the metaphors and images of the preceding 28 lines are processed in this context, a wide range of very weak implicatures are generated or represented. These implicatures, or *poetic effects*,[9] consist not just of fully formed propositions with truth conditions, but an array of non-propositional assumptions such as images, impressions, emotional states and so on; these are relatively weak, and the reader does not necessarily ascribe them definitely to the writer: that is, he does not assume that the writer intended him to recognise and entertain precisely these implicatures.

The phonological features of the poem, which I have discussed very briefly, constitute an interesting and perhaps different kind of evidence. It's true that the poet has carefully chosen these end-rhymes, and so we should pay attention to them: they are clearly ostensive acts. However, the effects of these on the reader which I have sketched out were not likely to have been intended to have been consciously entertained by the reader, if for no other reason that the poet had no access to phonological and phonetic theory. Yet the imitative nature of the sounds — the way they force the reader to mimic the facial and vocal behaviour of a person suffering from seething frustration and crippling

shyness — was very likely intentional; certainly, if they were not, their presence and effect are serendipitous at the very least. Of course, poets are sensitive to the sounds of their language, and can exploit the phonetic and phonological possibilities without having anything like a theory about them.

The sounds of the poem constitute evidence, alongside the propositional content and the impressions produced by the images, metaphors, and other loose uses of language, for the intended context which the reader should construct. As the reader processes the poem in this context, a range of implicatures is produced; when the interpretation satisfies the reader's expectations of relevance (always higher for ostensibly artistic uses of language), he will stop processing the poem. The effects I have discussed above may not be consciously recognised, but as long they are entertained (and so guide the reader to a line of interpretation which the writer foresaw and intended), then they have fulfilled their artistic function. More to the point, linguistics provides a tool for the analysis of the rhyme scheme, and Relevance Theory provides a model of interpretation which accounts for its effect on the reader.

The interpretation I have given of Greenwell's poem rests on the assumption that people's behaviour is evidence for their state of mind, whether or not they are conscious of their feelings or motives. The situation then becomes more complex, and turns on the degree to which either the speaker or the poet is aware of the impression the text produces. We might imagine that the writer at least had something like this in mind; but we should be cautious.

For one thing, there is no evidence that poets have explicit and conscious access to linguistic structures. Clearly, they are sensitive to these structures, and may well exploit that sensitivity to create works whose linguistic properties amplify, reinforce, or comment on the content of the work. But as Sperber and Wilson (1995, pp. 217–224) point out, there is no need to ascribe a consciousness about linguistic form to the writer. Furthermore, there is always an element of judgment involved: readers are capable of deciding whether a writer has succeeded in her attempt to exploit linguistic or poetic form in order to create poetic effects, and as we know, not every poem is a jewel. Finally, even if both speaker and writer are unaware of the ways in which the speaker's behaviour may suggest a more complex personality, the interpretation is not compromised. We evaluate interpretations for plausibility, exhaustiveness and unity, and when our expectations of relevance are satisfied, the process ends.

Conclusion

I have elaborated the ways in which contextual effects figure in *one* reading of Greenwell's poem — especially when the context includes a knowledge of phonology and English grammar. What I have not done is to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that this reading is the one which the writer intended, and

which we should therefore choose. It may not be possible ever to produce such a reading. Relevance Theory assumes that the reader is not aiming at an hypothesis which is *identical* to that conceived by the writer — if only because the writer herself does not consciously entertain all the possible implicatures of her text. Instead, Relevance Theory claims that the writer provides her reader with the evidence needed to construct the context which will yield an interpretation which she intended, or at least foresaw.

Furthermore, I have used this interpretation to demonstrate that we can use Relevance Theory to explicate the workings and nature of interpretive frameworks. We can see why some (such as structuralism or post-modernism) generally end up producing variations of the same interpretation, no matter what text they are applied to. They, like all interpretive frameworks, make certain assumptions about the world highly salient. In these cases, however, the assumptions concern the process of reading, or describe the nature of writing and language. Since the scope of the salient context is not the content but rather the vehicle of the text, and since the context makes salient the same small set of premises about language, it will come as no surprise that the mass of such interpretations are nearly identical. Because the interpretations reinforce the framework, and because the framework is about interpretation, the readings will be less about the specific texts under consideration, and more about the process of reading.

Interpretive frameworks consist of assumptions about the world; and since all literature is also about the world, then fruitful results can follow when these two are brought together. Relevance Theory provides an account not just of what interpretive frameworks are, but also of *what* they do, and *why* they are important. It also suggests a way in which we can bring together linguistics and literary studies. I want therefore to conclude with a modest proposal, in answer to Barthes' suggestion (Macksey and Donato, 1970, p. 316):

> Linguistics should demand a literary theory which does not exist; the role of linguistics may be to determine, to a certain degree, the need for a literary studies which does not exist. Literary studies needs useful descriptions of the components of the text, and a rational, motivated concept of context. Linguistics can provide both, thus alleviating the poverty of literary studies. I profess in the sincerity of my heart that I have not the least personal interest in endeavouring to promote this necessary work, having no other motive than the public good, by relieving the critic, and giving some pleasure to the student of literature.[10]

Notes

For the Greenwell poem I am indebted to my student, Mélanie Morin, whose essay "A Scherzo

for an Animated Shy Poet" introduced me to the poem and its possibilities. For thoughtful and rigorous comments which significantly improved the manuscript, I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer who took a great deal of trouble over an earlier draft.

[1] "Structuralism notes that much of our imaginative world is structured of, and structured by, binary oppositions (being/nothingness, hot/cold, culture/nature . . .)" (Lye, 1996).

[2] "[T]he structuralist use of linguistic terms ('morphology', 'grammar', etc.) as metaphors for narrative structure" are "far removed from the way that linguists actually use these terms in their own discipline" (Emmott, 2003, p. 228).

[3] Jackson (2003) discusses applying the criteria of scientific theorising to the output of interpretive practices.

[4] Scholars introducing new ideas accept at least these standards, implicitly contrasting the output of their interpretive frameworks with the products of previous theories or approaches.

[5] The Minimalist program stresses, e.g., parsimony.

[6] Linguists and philosophers interested in gender and language, such as Butler (1992), Coates (1993) and Schiffrin (1994), focus on uncovering the dynamics of gendered relations through discourse analysis. The same has been done for race, imperialism, social class and so forth.

[7] Following the conventions established in pragmatic literature, I refer to the communicator as *she* and the hearer or reader as *he*.

[8] Knapp and Pence (2003) remark that the "interpretive insights that guide scholarship . . . often produce the insights putatively found in the objects studied" (p. 651).

[9] For a detailed discussion of poetic effects, see Sperber and Wilson (1995, pp. 217–224) and Pilkington (2000).

[10] "I profess, in the sincerity of my heart, that I have not the least personal interest in endeavouring to promote this necessary work, having no other motive than the public good of my country, by advancing our trade, providing for infants, relieving the poor, and giving some pleasure to the rich", Jonathan Swift (*A Modest Proposal*, 2000; originally published in 1729).

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Appendix:
A Scherzo (A Shy Person's Wishes)

Dora Greenwell

> With the wasp at the innermost heart of a peach,
> On a sunny wall out of tip-toe reach,
> With the trout in the darkest summer pool,
> With the fern-seed clinging behind its cool
> Smooth frond, in the chink of an aged tree,
> In the woodbine's horn with the drunken bee,
> With the mouse in its nest in a furrow old,
> With the chrysalis wrapt in its gauzy fold;
> With things that are hidden, and safe, and bold,
> With things that are timid, and shy, and free,
> Wishing to be;
> With the nut in its shell, with the seed in its pod,
> With the corn as it sprouts in the kindly clod,
> Far down where the secret of beauty shows
> In the bulb of the tulip, before it blows;
> With things that are rooted, and firm, and deep,
> Quiet to lie, and wishing to sleep;
> With things that are chainless, and tameless, and proud,
> With the fire in the jagged thunder-cloud,
> With the wind in its sleep, with the wind in its waking,
> With the drops that go to the rainbow's making,
> Wishing to be with the light leaves shaking,
> Or stones on some desolate highway breaking;
> Far up on the hills, where no foot surprises
> The dew as it falls, or the dust as it rises;
> To be couched with the beast in its torrid lair,
> Or drifting on ice with the polar bear,
> With the weaver at work in his quiet loom;
> Anywhere, anywhere, out of this room!

(1867)

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