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Title
Proust and language-in-use

Permalink

Journal
Novel, 48(2)

ISSN

Author
Lucey, M

Publication Date
2015-08-01

DOI

Peer reviewed

Proust and Language-in-use

[This is the "Author's Final Version/Accepted Version" of "Proust and Language-in-Use."

Novel: A Forum on Fiction 48, no. 2 (2015): 261-279.]

Michael Lucey

Imagine listening in on a structured situation of talk – human beings exchanging

utterances – but listening not to *what people are saying* but to *how they are saying it*, perhaps to

features of the sound form such as tone, intonation, accent, stress, or prosody. You are perhaps

listening for melody and rhythm, perhaps for register effects; or perhaps you are noting the

frequency patterns of syntactic forms or of individual words or expressions. Listening to all

these aspects of an utterance (non-referential – or social–indexical features, we could call

them, because they point to social, cultural, or conceptual structures that are immanent in the

speech situation, and they make social meaning happen by invoking those structures for the

participants), you learn at least as much about who the speakers are, and what they are doing

by exchanging utterances, as you might by focusing your attention mainly on *what* they were

saying. The present article is part of a larger demonstration I would like to make: that there is a

current of novel writing, of which Proust is a lynchpin, that is interested in producing a form of

sociological knowledge that does not arise from semantics or from representation per se, but

from other aspects of the linguistic sign, other channels, we might say. The sociological

knowledge in question has to do with language-in-use, specifically with non-referential, social

indexical features of *talk* -- talk being understood in these novels as the medium in which key

forms of socio-cultural activity happen; talk being used continually to reproduce, but also to act

upon, various regions of the existing social order. The knowledge these novels pursue is often as

much related to the *how* of saying as to the *what.* In what follows, I would like both to demonstrate Proust's interest in language-in-use, and present a set of critical tools useful for appreciating that interest. His is an interest in the sociological functioning of talk, where talk is viewed not, in the first instance, as a medium for communicating via the meaning of words, but as a medium in which social work of various kinds is accomplished via non-semantic features of language.

Towards the end of Proust's novel, his narrator is reflecting upon the nature of his interest in other people's speech. "What people said escaped me," he writes, "because what interested me was not what they wanted to say, but the manner in which they said it, in so far as this revealed their character or their absurdities; or, rather, the object that had always been the aim of my researches, because it gave me a specific pleasure, was the point that was common to one being and another" (*Finding* 24). Noteworthy here is the narrator's sense of himself as pursuing fieldwork (researches) to help him understand people's speech (to collect the necessary data, we might imagine, to perceive forms of regularity traversing the speech of many different speakers), yet not in order to understand *what they say*, but rather to grasp the way their manner of speech relates them to others, the way it situates them in their world and enables them to enact certain kinds of identity, or to produce certain social effects. All of this happens, Proust's narrator suggests, through speech's pragmatic or socially indexical features, through manners of speaking. The novel's implicit claim here is that this kind of interest in speech, rather than being ill suited to novel writing (as Proust's narrator says he fears it might be), could itself lie at the heart of a particular kind of novelistic enterprise – the one that was Proust's.

Proust's narrator's reflections on his way of listening, and the research he does to understand what he hears, comes immediately after he has read (and the novel has reproduced) a passage putatively from the journal of Edmond de Goncourt but actually composed by Proust. The novel has thus just displayed several pages of text written in a different manner from that of the majority of the novel, and it has thereby somehow challenged readers both to perceive and to establish the meaning of a difference in manner. We might thereby be encouraged, the novel seems to imply, to undertake a reading of its own manner, to understand it (and other literary texts to which it might be taken to be responding) as being itself made up of language-in-use, as being part of a verbal exchange in which manner is very much at stake.

One of the ways in which people could be said to make use of aesthetic objects (including works of literature) is by talking about them. Proust's long novel shows an endless fascination with the sociological implications of the ways in which aesthetic objects are used and misused by different publics as their meaning unfolds, develops, happens in time. The *Recherche* also understands that to grasp the relation between a work's meaning and the history of its use by various readers and institutions, we will have to accept that meaning is never simply *in* things; it *happens* to them in their use. What I would like to call attention to in the pages ahead is first, the kinds of interest we find in Proust's novel for the way people speak – for how the way people speak is a crucial source of sociological information. I would like also to focus our attention on speech in the novel about literary objects, highlighting the novel's implicit claim that something crucial about the use people make of literary objects can be found in their manner of speaking about those objects. Finally, I would like to notice the way the novel demonstrates its interest in understanding language-in-use as the matter out of which novels

themselves are made. The examples I will use in developing these observations come from Proust's novel's second volume *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleur*.

1. Hearing language-in-use in Proust

À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs (in English either *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower* or *Within a Budding Grove*, depending on which translation you might be reading), comes in two parts. The second part is called "Noms de pays: Le pays" (Place-Names: The Place), and in it Proust's narrator tells the reader of two interlocking social projects he pursues during his first summer stay at the sea-side resort, Balbec. On the one hand he is, over the course of the summer, developing an acquaintance with various members of the aristocratic Guermantes clan: his grandmother's old school friend, Mme de Villeparisis; her nephew, Robert de Saint-Loup; and another of her nephews (but Saint-Loup's uncle), the Baron de Charlus. On the other hand, he becomes fascinated with a band of young girls whose social status he for a while has a hard time ascertaining and whose acquaintance seems even more challenging for him to make than that of the members of the exclusive Guermantes family. If the narrator and Saint-Loup seem fast friends within days of their first meeting, it is not until quite close to the end of the volume (and the end of the summer in question) that the narrator is finally able to display how comfortably ensconced he has become in the social lives of the group of young girls. In case we hadn't yet noticed that something in the way the novel is structured asks for us to think about these two projects of social exploration (the girls and the Guermantes) as somehow happening in parallel — complementary case studies, we might say, with important structural echoes between them — the narrator calls our attention to that fact in a wonderful four-page long

paragraph occurring about 50 pages before the 500 page volume closes. He does so by revealing that one project of social exploration is now interfering with the other, and in a way that might, from at least one point of view, seem not to be in his own best interest. Here is how the paragraph in question begins:

> Fashionable gatherings and Mme de Villeparisis's invitations to carriage outings were not the only pastimes I was willing to sacrifice to my games of ring-on-a-string and riddles with the girls. Robert de Saint-Loup had several times sent me word that, since I never went to visit him at Doncières, he had requested twenty-four hours' leave to come to Balbec. On each of these occasions I wrote to put him off, inventing the excuse of a family visit I said I was obliged to make that very day with my grandmother. He must have thought badly of me when he learned from his aunt the nature of this family visit and the identity of the people who were my grandmother for the occasion. (*Shadow* 485)

Saint-Loup is doing his military service a short distance from Balbec, and his newest close friend, our narrator, makes feeble excuses not to come visit him, and lies to him to put him off from himself making a trip to Balbec so they might spend some time together. All this is for the sake of time spent in the company of the band of young girls who so fascinate him. The rest of the long paragraph in question explains the narrator's justification for neglecting his new friend and organizing his time in a way that prevents him from cultivating this seemingly auspicious and advantageous new friendship:

> Yet, in sacrificing not just the joys of foregathering with the fashionable, but the joys of friendship too, to the pleasure of dallying the whole day in this lovely

garden, perhaps I was not ill advised. Those who have the opportunity to live for

themselves—they are artists, of course, and I was long since convinced that I

would never be one—also have the duty to do so; and for them, friendship is a

dereliction of that duty, a form of self-abdication. Even conversation, which is

friendship's mode of expression, is a superficial digression, through which we

can make no acquisition. (485)

Friendship is a waste of time for an artist, and conversation, which is at the heart of friendship,

has nothing to offer someone cultivating her or his own artistic sensibilities. This judgment

might seem a strange one, coming in the midst of a novel so much of which is given over to the

reporting of conversation, a novel that demonstrates a fascination with the mechanics (or even

the aesthetics) of talk. It might also seem a bit paradoxical. What, after all, is happening during

the time he spends with the band of girls? A lot of *talk*, it would seem (talk being one of the

principle varieties of language-in-use). But it turns out that the narrator's *relation* to talk in the

presence of Saint-Loup and his relation to talk in the presence of the girls is not the same. The

relation he has to the talk of the girls *contributes*, he claims, to his development as an artist. His

relation to the talk he and Saint-Loup perform together *damages* that same development. What

is the difference? His justification for his unfriendly behavior to Saint-Loup has to do with his

fascination — when in the company of the young girls — with what linguistic anthropologists

have come to call *non-referential indexicality*.

Indexes are commonly understood as parts of speech with little or no inherent semantic

content that serve to anchor utterances in space and time and to establish speaking roles. They

take their meaning from the context of the utterance itself: its time-frame (*yesterday*, *today*,

and *tomorrow* are indexes — or deictics — of time, depending on the moment of the utterance for their meaning), its location (*here* and *there* are indexes of place), its arrangement of speakers and listeners *(I, you, she, he, we, they* are all indexes of person), and so on. They help anchor discourse and make it feel meaningful; they establish a framework that allows for coherent conversation. Yet there is another (at least one) level of indexicality happening in language that doesn't exactly refer to the speaking situation, but that serves to anchor utterances in *social* time and *social* space. When someone speaks with an accent we recognize as providing evidence of where they spent time in the past, when someone uses a grammatical form ("how y'all be?") that leads us to assume something about their class or regional affiliations, when someone uses a bit of lexicon that is linked to youth culture at a certain point in time or space ("groovy," "dope," "awesome"), when a pronoun choice (*tu/vous*) or a choice among options for naming someone (Victor, as opposed to M. Victor Hugo, or Hugo) reveal assumptions about familiarity or status relations, this is what linguistic anthropologists call *non-referential indexicality*[1] — "functionally independent of reference as such," in Michael Silverstein's words, yet serving to "link speech to the wider system of social life" ("Shifters" 42, 53). You can refer to the same person as *tu* or as *vous*, as "buddy" or as "mate" or as "dude" or as "sir." Through your choice you invoke a social structure and imply something about yourself in relation to the person you address, about who you are, where you come from, and about how you understand the situation in which you are speaking.

When Proust's narrator listens to the talk happening around him while in the girls' company, he appears blithely unconcerned about the *topic* of the conversation in which he is a

participant. He admits that he is often not the slightest bit interested in anything the girls have to say. Yet he listens intently:

> When we exchanged words, which was not often, the things said by me and the girls of the little gang were without interest; and on my part, they were interrupted by long silences. This did not prevent me from listening to what the girls said with as much pleasure as when just looking at them, discovering through the voice of each of them the vividly colored picture of her. . . . When I chatted with one of the girls, I noticed that the outline of her individuality, original and unique, was ingeniously drawn and ruthlessly imposed upon me as much by the modulations of her voice as by the shifting expressions of her face . . . . The intonations of our voice express our philosophy of life, what one says to oneself at each moment about things. These features of the girls did not, of course, belong just to them: they belonged to their parents. As individuals, each of us lives our lives immersed in something more general than ourselves. Parents, for that matter, do not hand on only the habitual act of a facial and vocal feature, but also turns of phrase, certain special sayings, which are almost as deeply rooted and unconscious as an intonation, and point as much as it does to a point of view on life. (486-88)

Our narrator listens with pleasure to the most ordinary kinds of non-referential indexes found in the girls' speech. He is attentive, he says a bit further on, to "la savoureuse matière imposée par la province originelle d'où elles tiraient leur voix et à même laquelle mordaient leurs intonations" (*Recherche* 2:263) [the tasty matter that had been laid down by their province of

origin and from which they drew their voice; even their intonations were tightly bound up in this matter (488, but my translation)]. His vocabulary here is precise, inventive, surprising, difficult to translate. (Neither of the extant English translations even attempts to match it!) He perceives the girls' voices as arising from something material, some matter, that is furnished by the location where they were born. Their very intonations latch on to this matter the way a fish seizes the bait on the hook that catches it. He continues: "Whenever Andrée brusquely plucked a low note, she could not prevent the Périgourdine string in her vocal instrument from producing a singing tone, one that was, in fact, quite in harmony with the meridional purity of her features." Here it seems that the physical matter of Andrée's larynx, the vocal cords themselves, come from Périgord, and that no matter how hard she tried to alter the sound they produced, their place of origin would be revealed to knowing ears despite all her effort.

The knowing ears of the narrator are not only capable of positioning French voices precisely on the map of France, they allow him to hear the "philosophy of life" that both individuates each girl, and also links her to the family that has transmitted that philosophy to her. Yet the philosophy is not to be discovered in any set of stated precepts or maxims; it is not testified to by any action. It is inferred by the narrator from vocal inflections and intonations, from the presence of (but not necessarily the semantic content of) various characteristic phrases, syntactical turns, lexical choices, verbal tics. If, for the narrator, an accent is so deeply rooted in the "matter" of someone's voice that it is entirely unconscious and uncontrollable, these other indexes of a "philosophy of life" (which we might take to be shorthand for a particular point of view on the social world that the narrator feels he can locate with some precision thanks to his own experience of that social world and his participation in it) are nearly

as uncontrollable, if perhaps slightly more sociological and less material. (If each of us is "immersed [baigne] in something more general than ourselves" that something in which we are swimming is surely the surrounding social world.) It would seem that the narrator here is gesturing towards his experience of what Michael Silverstein calls "statistical indexes." Silverstein notes in an article from 1985 that:

> A tradition of so-called sociolinguistic study has emerged over the last 20 years that relates the frequencies of relatively Standard vs. non-Standard forms in samples of actual language production to the membership of speakers in any of a number of cross-cutting social groups and categories, and to the overall task demands of the contextual conditions of the produced samples. That is, frequencies of Standard/non-Standard linguistic forms can be seen as indexes of both social identities of the speaker and overall contextual "style," the strength of Standard-inducing demands made by various contexts of language production. ("Language" 234-35)[2]

In his article, Silverstein is particularly interested in the fact that it is possible to demonstrate that in English, "statistical frequency differentiation of forms goes along with gender-identity distinctions" (238). Proust's narrator, listening to the voices of the band of young girls, is obviously listening to the vocal production of their gender identities, but also to other aspects of their social identities (class- and region-based aspects, along with aspects of identity related to religious affiliation, intellectual and aesthetic dispositions, family structures, and other features of social status) that he hears both in certain frequency functions of elements of their

speech and also in features of the sound form of that speech such as pitch, intonation, and inflection.

Proust's narrator, in short, "hears" identities happening as he listens to language-in-use, he hears the girls swimming in the social world as they use language, and he does so — at least in the case of these girls — without paying much attention to "what" in particular any one of them might be saying.[3] What would it mean to read literature with ears such as these?

As a step towards approaching that questions, we might note that the narrator does also listen to the language use of the Guermantes clan in a way similar to (but not so obviously condescending as) the way he listens to the speech of the girls. Consider his way of reporting of the following exchange between Saint-Loup and Charlus:

> "You are quite fond of *Andromaque* and *Phèdre*, then?" Saint-Loup asked
> his uncle in a tone of slight disdain.
>
> "There is more truth in a single tragedy by Racine than in all the
> melodramas of M. Victor Hugo put together," M. de Charlus replied.
>
> "Aren't fashionable people atrocious?" Saint-Loup murmured in my ear.
> "Preferring Racine to Victor! Really! That's just off the wall." He was sincerely
> dejected by what his uncle had said, but the pleasure of saying "Really!" and
> especially "off the wall" was of some consolation to him. (344, translation
> modified)

At least three features of the utterance Saint-Loup whispers in the narrator's ear — features having to do with what the narrator understands to be happening on the non-referential plane — are called to our attention here : the use by Saint-Loup (and his pleasure in that use) of

idioms that clash with the register expectations that accompany his high social standing; his careful display of his allegiance to the literature written by or represented by Victor Hugo (at least when compared to the literature represented by Racine) as well as his claim to some kind of personal familiarity with "Victor"; finally, the fact that this utterance is whispered privately by a renegade (or perhaps we should say, pseudo-renegade) nobleman to someone not part of his clan. The narrator's presence, the proximity of his very ear, as well as the social position he and his ear occupy (he is an outsider, but sufficiently genteel to be welcomed into this elite company), we could say, are conditions of possibility for this utterance.[4]

In "'Cultural' Concepts and the Language-Culture Nexus," Silverstein describes how in the course of verbal interactions, participants invoke structures of knowledge, and then use expressions that denote elements of those structures to index "specific values or nodes within such knowledge schemata." In the paragraphs surrounding and including those just cited from Proust, such expressions include "Mme de Sévigné," "La Fontaine," "ces *Lettres*," "La Bruyère," "Racine," "*Andromaque*," "*Phèdre*," "M. Victor Hugo," "Victor" – tokens to be manipulated in the performance of a social identity. Who is allowed to know and like what kind of literature? Who chooses to do so? What is the importance of the distinction between classical and romantic writers, and how can it be mobilized? How does an opposition between those two kinds of writing map onto a generational opposition within the aristocracy? How do various generations of aristocrats choose to display their familiarity with both authors and works, and to what end? In Silverstein's words:

> What type of person, with what social characteristics, deploys such knowledge
> by using the expressions that normatively and actually index (invoke) it in a

particular configuration of cotext? With what degrees and kinds of authority do

interactants use expressions (reflecting knowledgeable familiarity from the

social structural position of the user with respect to ritual centers of authority

that "warrant" their use)? To who is authoritative knowledge ascribed, and who

can achieve at least a conversationally local state of authority with respect to it,

if not a perduring authority stretching beyond the instance of interaction? (632)

Silverstein calls our attention to the implicit assumptions or ascriptions of authority that

happen in verbal interchanges by means of the choice to use certain expressions instead of

others while invoking certain kinds of knowledge. We can use Silverstein's point to foreground

one of the consistent rhetorical features of the way Proust's narrator reports the utterances of

others. As he does so, he usually maps out for the reader local states of authority being

produced in the speech he hears, and in which his own ability to speak is in certain ways

circumscribed or curtailed. (It would not be for him to refer to Hugo as Victor…). And yet the

narrator's implicit claim, in mapping for us the production of these local states of authority is

that he, as narrator, over a longer time frame and thanks to the sensitivity with which he

registers the workings of language-in-use around him, possesses a more "perduring authority

stretching beyond the instance of interaction." Locally, the narrator's ability to notice

something about the way Saint-Loup speaks to him provides him with an experience of his own

social positioning at that moment in time. He is a useful foil for Saint-Loup, enabling the young

aristocrat to display his differences from his more snobbish uncle. We could say, in a certain

way, that the narrator, in the presence of Charlus and Saint-Loup is, because of his extreme

sensitivity to the workings of language-in-use, made to experience himself as socially useful,

indeed, as *used* by these two aristocrats as a foil to their interaction*,* and that this feeling is, at least on this occasion, a somewhat unpleasant one. Our narrator would probably prefer that the social facts of his personhood not count as elements contributing to the production of the various kinds of meaning to which he is sensitive in the language use around him. In the case of listening to the girls, it seems he feels (at least in the moment we have considered) more that he is useless, inconsequential, invisible, a neutral participant-observer who imagines his presence has no effect on the discourse that happens around him, a mere medium for registering the speech of the girls, unimplicated socially. (Any such feeling is illusory, of course, as the development of his relationship with Albertine across the next few volumes makes exceedingly clear.)[5]

The very fact of the difference between Proust's unreliable narrator's experience of his own socio-linguistic position in, on the one hand, the exchanges of language with and between the girls and, on the other, those between Saint-Loup and Charlus reveals to the reader the narrator's non-neutrality within the social world. His speech as well as his silence work to position him socially just as do the speech (and the sounds of that speech) of the girls or of the Guermantes. On another level, then, the novel itself, like the narrator, is interested in language-in-use, interested in the language the narrator uses, and the implications of that use. Moreover, as the interest in the conversation about Hugo and Racine implies, the novel is interested both in literature *in* and literature *as* language-in-use. If the novel, in the passage we have just been considering, implicitly poses the question as to how the narrator himself would choose to refer to M. Victor Hugo and what he might have to say about Hugo's person or his works, it also consistently illustrates how talk about literature differs from social location to

social location, and in so doing it illustrates that it is, itself, as a novel, frequently a form of talk about literature. Here, for instance, is the passage from the scene with the band of girls that parallels the exchange between Charlus and Saint-Loup regarding Racine and Victor Hugo. In it, the narrator reports on a letter from one of the girls, Gisèle, to Albertine regarding an exam that she has just taken and that Albertine will be taking in the near future:

> The forebodings Albertine had expressed about the difficulty of the essays had been more than borne out by the two topics, of which Gisèle had had to choose one: "Writing to Racine from the Underworld, Sophocles commiserates with him over the failure of *Athalie*"; and "Imagine that Mme de Sévigné, having seen the first performance of Racine's *Esther*, writes a letter to Mme de Lafayette to say how much she wishes the latter could have been there too." (490)

There is much that could be said about this passage, and the subsequent strategizing among the girls that the narrator reports in detail as to how to prepare for such exams, how to choose among questions, how successful Gisèle's exam essay (part of which is included in the novel) is, and how it might have been improved.[6] Here it simply serves as evidence that the novel is interested in how, why, and when people talk about literature the way they do, and how they are trained to do so. It is not such a big step to then say that the novel itself is involved in the same game: it both is and it reproduces talk about literature. It provides the elements of a knowledge schema that organizes information about how and why certain people (upwardly mobile middle-class girls, cultivated bourgeois grandmothers, older male aristocrats, younger male aristocrats, and their aunts) talk about literature in the way they do, and thus implicitly suggests that there must be a place in that schema both for the narrator (an aspiring writer)

and how he talks about literature, and for the novel itself (as well as for its readers: it asks that we write about it, use it, in whatever way we end up doing, even if it should turn out to be as students sitting for an exam). In short, the *Recherche* might be said to understand itself as an extended example of literature as language-in-use. It might be asking to be listened to with the kinds of ears the narrator uses to listen to the girls or Saint-Loup or Charlus.

2. Tools for Apprehending Literature as Language-in-use

I'd like to take a few paragraphs now to draw together a number of ideas from the work of M.M. Bakhtin, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michael Silverstein. Out of the interplay between those ideas I hope to open up some ways of developing what it means to think of, or to be able to read a particular literary work as an example of language-in-use. But as a starting place, let me cite a passage from section 432 of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*:

> Every sign by itself seems dead. What gives it life? – In use it is alive. Is the breath of life there and then within it? Or is the use its breath?

> [Jedes Zeichen scheint allein tot. Was gibt ihm Leben? -- Im Gebrauch lebt es. Hat es da den lebenden Atem in sich? – Oder ist der Gebrauch sein Atem?] (108, translation modified)

Wittgenstein associates "use" with life and with breath. In a famous sentence from section 43 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, he also associates it with meaning: "For a *large* class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (18). Wittgenstein's claims have been taken up as a way of

marking a difference from claims that meaning happens "in" an utterance (in the sense that the meaning would arise primarily from its semantic and syntactic features) in order to focus on meaning as produced in the context of the utterance, in its use in context.[7] The hesitation between the two final questions in section 432 is interesting: is the breath of life a potential lurking within the word or the utterance itself, waiting to be woken through its use, or is the use itself what makes it live? (Is meaning immanent in an utterance and revealed upon use or emergent from the utterance as a result of its use?) What does the use of an utterance add to it? We could (remembering Proust) easily make a preliminary list: it adds context, intonation, accent, a speaker, a location in social space, addressees, bystanders, a situation, the history that leads up to it, and that which follows… The question regarding to what degree meaning is immanent or emergent in utterances is one to which we will return in what follows. In either case, if our focus is on use, we are required to develop a way of thinking about what context is and how use itself brings context into play.

Pierre Bourdieu could be said to give sociological content to the notion of use that Wittgenstein lays out for us. He develops a particular approach to context through his concept of the *field* of linguistic or of cultural production, a field in which both language itself and cultural objects are taken up and used in various ways that are linked to the history and the structure of the field in question and to the history and habitus of the agents acting within that field. For Bourdieu, a focus on use opens a space for sociological observation, revealing something of what is left out, for instance, of the analysis of language as a formal system, language understood as *langue* the way it was elaborated in structural linguistics. *Langue*, Bourdieu suggested, emphasized "the autonomy attributed to language in relation to its social

conditions of production, reproduction, and use" (*Language* 33). As Bourdieu noted, a sociology

of language needs rather to understand how language in its use comes to associate structured

forms of linguistic difference with other structured forms of social difference. To speak is to act

socially — but this action often occurs through the invocation or production of meanings that

arise from linguistic features statistically linked to specific contexts or regions of use,

registered in the "how" rather than in the "what" of what is being said:

> The social uses of language owe their specifically social value to the fact that they
>
> tend to be organized in systems of differences (between prosodic and
>
> articulatory or lexical and syntactic variants) which reproduce, in the symbolic
>
> order of differential deviations, the system of social differences. To speak is to
>
> appropriate one or other of the expressive styles already constituted in and
>
> through usage and objectively marked by their position in a hierarchy of styles
>
> which expresses the hierarchy of corresponding social groups. (54)

Habits of pronunciation, rhythms of speech, accent and intonation, word choice, the choice of

one syntactic form over another, all of these features reveal the socially organizing work that

happens in language use. Their meaning depends on the structure of the social universe in

which the use takes place, and the use ties itself indexically to that social structure. On a

different level, various ways of talking about literature (the way Charlus would, the way Saint-

Loup would, the way Albertine would, the way the narrator's grandmother would, the way the

narrator would) function in a similar fashion, to distinguish the social location, disposition, and

aspirations of the speaker. Both language use and the uses of cultural objects have histories and

also occur within organized structures to which we necessarily refer and in which we situate

ourselves when, in our turn, we make use of them. We invoke a system of distinctive

differences as a part of establishing who we are in speaking.

When, in literary studies, we think of context, contextualization, or intertextuality, we

often dwell in the realm of text-artifacts themselves, weighing what claims we can make for

the relations between one text and another, or between a text and accounts that have been

made of its historical and cultural surroundings. To think of literature as language-in-use is

perhaps a slightly different activity. We might characterize the difference as related to a

number of slight shifts in emphasis: from the artifactual to the interactive, from the semantic

or representational to the pragmatic and social indexical, from context imagined as some kind

of fixed surrounding, to a sense that context is in a state of continual production: that to make

an utterance is to make a claim on context, to make a claim on context is to assert a certain

point of view on some aspect of social reality.

Elsewhere, I have written a bit speculatively about the possibility of "suspending" a text

artifact in a particular set of contexts in order to think about "how the suspension itself, rather

than the text or the contexts on their own" can reveal something about the social processes in

which a text -- in both its production and its subsequent uptakes – can be involved.[8] In that

work I was thinking about forms of sexuality that can be demonstrated to have a social

existence without having easy access to names that might identify them, and I was interested

in how certain literary works that did not necessarily *represent* those sexualities, could

nonetheless, when viewed as part of a certain socio-textual array, be seen as involved in

registering the existence of those misfit sexualities. Constructing such arrays is perhaps not

exactly an act of textual interpretation, not an act of what we often refer to as reading, so much

as it is an effort to capture a moment of process, and to see how that process is a part of what a text is and becomes, what it can then be said to mean.

In their introduction to the volume *The Natural History of Discourse,* Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban note that "To equate culture with its resultant texts is to miss the fact that texts (as we see them, the precipitates of continuous cultural processes) represent one, 'thing-y' phase in a broader conceptualization of cultural process" (1). (Proust, we might recall here, is, if anything, a novelist of process.) What Silverstein and Urban, along with other linguistic anthropologists working in the language-in-use tradition, aim at is "the study of culture not just as text, but as entextualization processes in which the text is but one moment." Process is prioritized, because it is in real-time usage situations that "entextualization reveals an architecture of social relations. . ." (14). In the words of Richard Bauman and Joel Sherzer from a review article from 1975, when the language-in-use movement in North American linguistic anthropology was just starting to gather steam, what was being pursued was "the study of social structures as emergent in speech events" (112). (They might have been talking about Proust…) Both halves of the pair of alternatives we noted in Wittgenstein, between immanent and emergent meanings, are regularly referenced in the work of thinkers such as these. What does it mean to say that entextualization (the process of producing an utterance that could be said to cohere with a context – a context that is itself being delineated or asserted by the speaker out of a myriad of possible contextual constructs) *reveals* an (immanent) architecture of social relations or to say that social relations *emerge* from speech events? In a different moment Silverstein describes culture as existing "only by virtue of its being invoked — indexically called into being — primarily in discursive interaction, the kind of social action that occurs through

the use of language and its dependent sign systems" ("Improvisational" 266). The verb *invoke* somehow yokes together the two sides of Wittgenstein's hesitation: meaning that could be called *immanent* in a culture *emerges* only thanks to an utterance or an exchange of utterances in a particular context of use that together *invoke* that meaning.

Linguistic anthropologists deal with *talk* (and with the transcripts and recordings they make of it). What can be gained for the understanding of literary texts if we take into account that they, like other cases of sign usage, live in their use, that, in their "thingy" textual form (and it is probably worth recalling that this is not the only form in which they exist) they are also an "extract" of "a portion of ongoing social action" (Silverstein and Urban 1)? Bakhtin, in his late essay "The Problem of Speech Genres," offers some observations that can help us to pursue this line of thought. If Bakhtin seems germane to this discussion, it is in large measure because in that essay he makes no bones about *not* distinguishing between talk and (literary) writing. He writes: "The novel as a whole is an utterance just as rejoinders in everyday dialogue or private letters are"(62). A few pages later, he will note that "Of course, an utterance is not always followed immediately by an articulated response. . . . In most cases, genres of complex cultural communication are intended precisely for [a] kind of active responsive understanding with delayed action" (68-69). The implication is that in order to think about exchanges of literary utterances we must develop an expanded notion of the "realtime" of interaction. Literary utterances are part of a conversation that happens over months, years, decades, centuries. Whose contributions to the conversation get heard and become impactful is never done being determined. Nor is the question as to the nature and the genre of those contributions ever fully answered. We could also extrapolate from Bakhtin's observations that

even relatively fixed text artifacts themselves can remain caught up in the flow of cultural

process in a variety of ways. We might also note Bakhtin's reminder that certain features we

might take to be specific to spoken utterances may have some kind of correlate in written texts:

"intonation is recognized by us and exists as a stylistic factor even with silent reading of written

speech," he comments (85). In the final section of this essay we will look at how Proust's

narrator "listens" for the writer Bergotte's "accent" in his published prose.

To think about literary texts caught up in an interactive process is therefore both to think

about their use in an extended "realtime." When Bourdieu writes about the collective

production of the public meaning of a literary work, he too is obviously thinking about a

realtime interactive process (one involving many more kinds of utterances and actions than

"purely" literary ones) that is taking place within a literary field whose preexisting structures

exert a shaping influence on those utterances and actions:

> The public meaning of the work, as an objectively instituted judgment on the
>
> value and truth of the work (in relation to which any individual judgment of
>
> taste is obliged to define itself) is necessarily collective. That is to say that the
>
> subject of an aesthetic judgment is a "one" which may take itself for an "I": the
>
> objectivization of the creative intention which one might call "publication" (in
>
> the sense of "being made public") is accomplished by way of an infinite number
>
> of particular social relationships, between publisher and author, between author
>
> and critic, between authors, etc. ("Intellectual" 104)

To perceive the way interactions between all these figures are shaped by the field in which they

occur involves reconstructing the indexical relations between text and field, between

interaction and field; it involves reconstructing the collectively produced *interactional* text of which cultural objects are a part.

In order to explore the applicability of these various lines of thought to a literary utterance we would have, as I have already noted, to be willing to put on hold whatever attachment we have to the "thingy" notion of, say, a novel, the idea that a novel is a book existing between two covers, or a sequence of signs in an electronic file that flow in ordered fashion across the screen of our e-reader. Our attention would have to shift to those aspects of the novel, those other channels of the sign form, that Wittgenstein referred to as "breath" and "life": processes in which it is caught up as it comes into being, and then processes of uptake across time as it is read, used, ascribed meanings, negotiated with, cited, transmitted, mentioned in conversations, assigned for exams, circulated for all kinds of reasons and to all kinds of ends. This would involve being not just readers of a novel, we must also "read" (or, thinking of Proust's narrator, we must research or undertake fieldwork regarding) the relations between the novel and other utterances (some of which may have no artifactual existence) that help it be or become what it is. We could say then, that the object of our attention becomes the web of social indexical relations in which a literary utterance is caught up. Utterances rely on previous utterances, Bakhtin insists in "The Problem of Speech Genres." Any speaker or any novelist "presupposes not only the existence of the language system he is using, but also the existence of preceding utterances—his own and others'—with which his given utterance enters into one kind of relation or another (builds on them, polemicizes with them, or simply presumes that they are already known to the listener). Any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized

chain of other utterances"(69). Let us return to Proust's novel to see how his narrator takes up some of these same lines of thought.

3. Literature and language-in-use

When, in the first half of *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleur*, Proust's narrator attends a luncheon at the Swanns where he meets his literary idol, Bergotte, he is immediately attentive to Bergotte's accent, and embarks upon a long disquisition regarding the relations it is possible to establish between that accent and Bergotte's writing. In the course of these reflections, the narrator implicitly elaborates a theory of the literary field and its role in the production of certain kinds of meaning. He also insists upon the way a literary work can draw meaning from social relations that surround and perfuse it from outside the literary field per se. Most of the properties of utterances or speech genres we have seen elaborated by Bakhtin, much of the thinking about meaning as a process that unfolds interactively that is common to Bourdieu, Silverstein, and Bakhtin, much of Bourdieu's sociological understanding of the ways authors and works are caught up in structured relations and temporal processes specific to their given field of cultural production, seem already to have been apparent to Proust and to have found practical expression in his novel. As we have already seen, numerous moments in the second half of *À l'ombre* (and indeed, throughout the *Recherche*) are very much concerned with how meaning happens in specific moments of language use. The passage regarding Bergotte's accent in the first half of that volume is particularly well suited to allow us to track the movement between, on one level, the concern with forms of non-referential indexicality in a spoken utterance that we have seen in the passage regarding the speech of the girls and, on

another level, a concern with indexicality of a slightly different order — that involving the relationships that come to exist between different works of literature, their authors, and the surrounding cultural universe (concerns we find foregrounded in different ways in Bourdieu's work on literature and in Bakhtin's way of thinking about literature). Bergotte's accent functions as a kind of pivot, a mediating device between these two orders of indexicality. It allows the narrator to listen to Bergotte the way he listens to the girls, but it also provides him insight into the situatedness of Bergotte's literary production. Hearing Bergotte's spoken accent makes Bergotte's writing mean things for the narrator that it did not mean (could not have meant) before he had heard this accent. In the narrator's ears, this accent establishes relationships between Bergotte, his writing, and his social world as well as between Bergotte and other writers in the surrounding literary field.

> Certain idiosyncrasies of elocution that could be faintly detected in Bergotte's conversation were not peculiar to him; and when I later came to know his brothers and sisters, I noticed that their speech was much more marked by these than his was. It had something to do with a sharp, hoarse fall to the last words of a cheerful statement, or a faint and fading voice at the end of a sad one. Swann, who had known the Master as a child, once told me that in those days Bergotte's voice was as full as his brothers' and sisters' of these more or less family inflections, outbursts of violent glee alternating with slow, melancholy murmurs, and that, when they were all together in the playroom, the young Bergotte could be heard holding his own better than anyone in their concerts, alternately deafening and languid. However distinctive it may be, all this noise

made by different beings is transitory and does not outlive the beings who make

it. But that was not the case with the Bergotte family pronunciation. . . .

Bergotte had transposed and set in prose those ways of drawing out words that

find themselves repeated in joyous uproars, or dribble away in sad sighs. There

are in his books such sentence endings in which the accumulated sonorities

sustain themselves, like the final chords to an operatic overture that cannot

bring itself to end and so repeats multiple times its closing cadence before the

conductor finally lays down his baton, that I came to see later as a musical

equivalent of the Bergotte family's phonetic brasses. (128-129)

That Bergotte has what it seems we should call a family accent is not something the narrator

knows when he firsts meets him and hears him speak. He hears this part of Bergotte's voice

retrospectively, we might say, after meeting his siblings and after the conversation with

Swann that he mentions here. Only then does this aspect of Bergotte's speech become audible,

salient, meaningful. The attention to Bergotte's family accent is an example of the narrator

listening to Bergotte (over time) the way he listens to the voices of the girls in Balbec later in

the same volume. He invests his attention in sonic features of the language rather than

semantic ones, finds meaning of various kinds in or through those sonic features, and then goes

on to find correspondences between those sonic features and the style of Bergotte's writing.

The sonic features that hold the narrator's attention position Bergotte in a particular (familial)

microcosm of the social world. Also, for those with the ears to hear and the eyes to read, the

written equivalent of those sonic features memorializes that family's way of speaking in works

of literature. It's not just his family's accent that he puts into circulation in written form, it is

also the affective registers and flows characterizing their interactions (and that existed in the shape of the sound forms themselves) that find themselves incorporated into Bergotte's prose.

Obviously, our narrator is not here relating to Bergotte in any way that a literary critic typically relates to an author or to a literary work. He seems more like an amateur socio-linguist or even a linguistic anthropologist — someone for whom literary texts and audible speech both provide data of a sort, data regarding forms of speech that are perhaps tied to region, class, family background, as well as age and affect. The literary texts hold meaning for him, or information, but a different kind of meaning or information than a literary critic might seek to find in them.

Yet as the analysis of Bergotte's speech continues, it takes an interesting turn, one that shows the narrator to have a specific sociological interest in the profession of literature, in literature as part of a field of cultural production. Here the narrator also reveals himself to be attentive to certain ways in which one literary utterance impacts another within the field in question:

> Other features of his diction he shared not with members of his family but with certain writers of his day. Certain younger writers who were beginning to disown him, and who claimed to have no intellectual affinity with him, showed their debt to him without meaning to by way of their use of certain adverbs or prepositions that he was always using, in constructing sentences after his manner, in speaking in the same dawdling and almost toneless fashion, in reaction against the facile grandiloquence of a previous generation. It may be that these young men had never known Bergotte (this was certainly the case, as

will be seen, with some of them). But they had been inoculated with his way of

thinking, and it had developed in them those modifications of syntax and accent

which bear a necessary relation to intellectual originality. This is a relation that

requires some interpretation. The fact was that, though Bergotte's way of

writing owed nothing to anyone, he was indebted for his speaking style to one of

his old friends, a wonderful talker who had had a great influence on him, whom

he imitated unintentionally in conversation, but who, being less gifted than

Bergotte, had never written a book that was in any way out of the ordinary.

Thus, if judged only on originality of spoken delivery, Bergotte would have been

properly deemed to be a mere disciple, a purveyor of hand-me-downs; whereas,

despite having been influenced in speech habits by his friend, he had still been

original and creative as a writer. (130)

The narrator understands the literary field in which he and Bergotte are actors to be composed

of sets of structured relations in which, for instance, writers of one generation can have a

relation to writers of an earlier generation without even knowing or reading them, because the

relation is constructed by, mediated by, and endures within the older writer's effect on the

field, an effect that can be transmitted by other means than direct contact. Proust's narrator is

claiming to hear the field's forces at work in syntactic choices, in choices of adverbs and

prepositions, as well as in features of verbal expression such as tone and register. Yet the

narrator also understands utterances produced in this field of cultural production to have

meaningful connections to other kinds of social relations — Bergotte's relation to "one of his old

friends," who was a better talker, and who, through his talking, unintentionally spurred Bergotte's development as a writer.

To be a writer is to be a member of a speech community; in writing, one enregisters different aspects of that speech community; to be a reader or a critic — to be the kind of reader or critic Proust's narrator is modeling for us — is to attempt to reconstruct something of the speech community in which the writing originated. A critic may or may not have, or may or may not be able to acquire the knowledge necessary to do that. The narrator, devoted reader of Bergotte, seems to have been prompted by that devotion into substantial amounts of fieldwork regarding Bergotte's family, his intellectual and social development, and his networks of acquaintances. The narrator's extensive research program has included not only reading, but actually going to hear the speech of key figures of Bergotte's past. We could imagine that he wanted to listen to the speech of Bergotte and his family and friends the way we have seen him listening to the speech of the girls: "The intonations of our voice express our philosophy of life, what one says to oneself at each moment about things. . . . As individuals, each of us lives our lives immersed in something more general than ourselves." There are "turns of phrase, certain special sayings, which are almost as deeply rooted and unconscious as an intonation, and point as much as it does to a point of view on life" (487-88). We could say that one thing the narrator is demonstrating for us is the quest for the knowledge and the interpretative techniques required to make different orders of the indexical functioning of a piece of literary writing -- and the kinds of meaning attendant on them -- perceptible.

I noted earlier that the narrator sometimes like to pretend (although the pretense is a thin one) that he is not implicated in the social world he is investigating. He and his utterances are

obviously implicated in the world he explores, just as is the utterance in which he exists, the *Recherche* itself. What I have been offering here has obviously not been an analysis of Proust that attempts to reconstruct any of the contexts in which his own literary utterances were participating (nor one that tries to pinpoint with any precision the literary ideology of his narrator).[9] Rather, I have here been offering ways of using Proust's novel to think about literature as language-in-use, ways suggested by the novel itself. For all the passages I have been considering from the *Recherche* could (indeed *should*) be taken as offering a metapragmatic reflection regarding the analysis of meaning that happens in and around utterances exchanged in general scenes of talk, utterances specifically about works of literature, and literary utterances themselves (e.g. novels) as they interact, as they move through time, as they *live*, we could say, echoing Wittgenstein. These passages from Proust's novel offer encouragement to read and listen the way the narrator often does, to various social indexical features of language-in-use and to the specific kinds of meaning production attendant upon them. Within Proust's novel, forms of cultural affiliation as well as forms of sexual desire move in these pragmatic, social-indexical channels. In fact, whatever the narrator's seeming aloofness or distance from the scenes he sometimes describes, his taste (e.g. for Bergotte) and his desire (e.g. for Albertine) are also taking shape pragmatically, in process, almost without being referred to, as the novel unfolds. That the novel itself also meant to intervene in ongoing social processes of aesthetic distinction and ongoing social processes related to the evolution of sexual forms and forms of desire is by now a foregone conclusion, as is, perhaps, the novel's implicit claim that it is part of the function of literature to do those very things.[10] The *Recherche,* I am suggesting, is very much alive, in Wittgenstein's sense, inoculating others with its accent and thereby certain

of its ways of thinking about how literature works and lives. It is asking, it seems to me, to be used in a certain way – to be understood as an utterance about itself as an utterance, about other utterances, past and future, and responding to any number of them in meaningful ways that require both attentive ears and certain kinds of fieldwork if any attendant meaning is to emerge.

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[1] Cf. Mertz 6.

[2] Silverstein is referencing the well-known work of sociolinguist William Labov, *Sociolinguistic Patterns.*

[3] I am thinking here of Silverstein's synthetic account of the goals of linguistic anthropology in relation to language-in-use: "In discursively mediated interaction, whether as 'native' users or as analyst-investigators, we perceive ourselves to be sending and receiving messages to and from so-called real or fictional individuals; we communicate about states of affairs concerning all manner of experienceable and imaginable things. But we are at the same time experiencing culture by communicating through this exemplar, medium, and site: language-in-use. I want to demonstrate here how linguistic anthropologists 'listen to' language analytically in this second mode in order to 'hear' culture. I want to point out, in particular, that we can 'hear' culture only by 'listening to' language in a certain way" ("Cultural" 621).

[4] See Genette for a seminal treatment of how connotation works in Proust. Genette refers to the passage under discussion here on 264-65.

5 See, for instance, Dubois on this general topic. Note also that the narrator is as attentive to questions of inflexion and intonation in aristocratic voices as he is in the voices of the band of girls. The paragraphs just cited on Racine and Victor Hugo are followed by one including a famous description of Charlus's voice: "His very voice, like certain contralto voices in which the middle register has been insufficiently trained and which, in song, sounds rather like an antiphonal duet between a young man and a woman, rose as he expressed these subtle insights to higher notes, took on an unexpected gentleness, and seemed to echo choirs of brides and sisters pouring out their tenderness" (345).

6 See Austin for information on the social background to this passage.

7 See, for example, Conant.

8 Lucey, "Contexts," 341. See also, Lucey, "Simone de Beauvoir."

9 Doing that will be a part of the larger project from which this article is drawn, a project that will track the novelistic preoccupation we see in Proust with talk and the production of meaning in language-in-use both forward and backward in time and will pursue the interest certain novels have in the production of sociological knowledge in relation to their investigation of language-in-use.

10 See Lucey, *Never Say I*, on this topic.