Topics in Linguistics - Issue 15 – June 2015

DE GRUYTER
OPEN

DOI: 10.2478/topling-2015-0006

Textual meaning and its place in a theory of language

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Abstract
Following the development of a framework for critical stylistics (Jeffries 2010) and the explication of some of the theoretical assumptions behind this framework (Jeffries 2014a, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b), the present article attempts to put this framework into a larger theoretical context as a way to approach textual meaning. Using examples from the popular U.S. television show, The Big Bang Theory, I examine the evidence that there is a kind of textual meaning which can be distinguished from the core propositional meaning on the one hand and from contextual, interpersonal meaning on the other. The specific aim, to demonstrate a layer of meaning belonging to text specifically, is set within an argument which claims that progress in linguistics can better be served by adherence to a rigorous scientific discipline.

Keywords
Critical stylistics; rigour; textual meaning; textual conceptual functions; linguistic theory.

Introduction

If we date it from the posthumous publication of Saussure's 'Cours de Linguistique' in 1916, modern linguistics has not quite been around for a century. It is therefore still a young subject and it continues to expand its field of interest and develop its range of theories and methods in each generation. This is a success story which deserves appreciation. The reason that I am starting this article in such a general way is that I wish to propose that we pause and consider the basis of the great achievements of our discipline as the prelude to continued development and expansion.

1. Background

The basis of linguistics' achievements, in my view, is its initial insistence on the science foundations that underpinned it. This has provided the systematicity and rigour that allowed early research into structural aspects of language to be evidenced, tested, contested and built upon to the point where we have a relatively strong description of many languages of the world, some of which has now become naturalised as an accurate account of how languages work. There is a great deal more to do, and there are periodic changes of emphasis. For example, there was a huge shift of emphasis between the text-oriented structuralist accounts of language (e.g. Saussure 1916) and the cognitive basis of Chomsky's approach (e.g. Chomsky 1965), but I would argue that some things are now pretty much established truths. These include, for example, the fact that languages are multi-layered structurally, meaning that we are producing/processing phonology, morphology, syntax and discourse levels of structure when we speak or listen. We are also doing other things, of course, but insights gained from these levels of linguistic investigation remain the common currency of much linguistics.

As linguistics developed, it started looking outwards from the structural aspects of idealised languages, towards the variation amongst their speakers (sociolinguistics), the systematic nature of language use (pragmatics) and the cognitive underpinnings of language learning, language production and language reception. Each of these departures from the initial narrow aim to describe the abstract code of human language has developed its own theories and methods and yet most of the time they have stayed close to the original aim – at least to be systematic and to focus on a manageable strand of linguistic activity/meaning.

The one area of linguistic study which has not held on so tightly to this systematicity is the development of linguistics concerned with structures larger than the sentence. Whilst early discourse analysis (e.g. Coulthard 1992) was absolutely in the scientific tradition of linguistics and was empirical and evidence-based, my experience of some of what followed thereafter lacks the attention to rigour that is necessary for others to see how the researcher has reached his/her conclusions from the data investigated. This is partly because it was perceived, quite rightly, that human language is not primarily abstract and is highly affected by its context. The response to this fact was to move towards neighbouring disciplines such as sociology, politics and psychology to try to integrate the study of language into a wider framework of human interaction.

The problem with this development was a logistical one. The more aspects of a phenomenon you try to study at once, the less you can be rigorous, systematic, empirical etc. There is simply too much to do. So, the result is that much work in these fields, interesting as it is, fails the basic test of all good science of being replicable. It is simply not possible in many cases to work out what data was investigated, how the examples given were chosen and whether the analysis was comprehensive, sampled in a principled way or simply impressionistic. To be fair, I think some of the scholars in this field would no longer claim that they were aiming at scientific rigour in the narrow sense, but I am unwilling to give up this quest, as it is the reason I studied linguistics in the first place.

Jeffries (2000) set out a case for eclecticism in linguistics which rested on a strong conviction that we will not progress further in our understanding of human language if we persist in trying to develop holistic models of language that subsume every aspect of the communicative process in one framework. Far better, it seems to me, to identify separable strands of linguistic behaviour to look at in isolation before then considering how they tie in with other strands. This is the way that the hard sciences work and how they make progress; by working on manageable small problems which form part of the larger picture. Whilst some theoretical work may usefully develop comprehensive theories at the highest level of generalisation, these do not usually attempt to incorporate all the detail of every level of structure of the phenomenon under investigation. Instead, they provide an umbrella theory (with associated model) below which other models may form part of the whole picture.

The argument I put forward in 2000 is not the weak claim that this is the only way our impoverished human minds can cope with the complexity of the data we are concerned with, whether that be particle physics or human language. Rather, I argued, theorising at all requires the production of testable hypotheses [1] which are paradoxically, but inevitably, simpler than the data that they are investigating. Thus, for example, the practice of trying to control all variables except one, so that we can be certain of the findings being linked to that variable, is one way that scientific approaches try to shine a light on one aspect of a phenomenon at a time. This may be simplifying, but seems to me absolutely necessary for progress. A theory which produces models as or more complex than the data does not usually manage to explain much about how that data is structured or works.

Another question for linguistics is the challenge from cognitivism, in particular the argument that descriptive models produced by theories of language tend to be intuitively unsatisfactory. This claim depends on the argument that models which separate out different strands of structure/meaning imply a range of concurrent processing by the brain which looks at first glance to be uneconomical of effort and potentially very costly in energy for the brain to cope with. This is a reasonable challenge, but one that I believe misses the point of scientific models. There is no claim that atoms in reality look just like the models that are used in chemistry textbooks to illustrate their make-up. These are really metaphors for what atomic structure is like and as long as the model can be built upon to try out other ideas, then it is a useful one. Like over-extended metaphors, models can become unwieldy when new discoveries are made and then a new one may be needed. But there is no claim that they are in any sense ‘real’ and to argue against them on these grounds is a misunderstanding of what is going on. In addition, the argument from intuition is a weak one as human intuition is not a good guide to scientific reality as generations of scientists have discovered in disproving long-held assumptions such as the Earth being flat and the centrality of Earth in the heavens.

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[1] Of course, cultural and literary studies have long used the term 'theory' to describe models of literary and cultural meaning which are entirely untestable, but I would say that this is a different meaning of the term and not one towards which linguistics ought to aspire.

If these principles of models as metaphors are accepted, the differences between, for example, Gricean scholars (see K. Petrus, ed. 2010) and Relevance theorists (e.g. Sperber and Wilson 2004) about whether there is too much cognitive processing implied by one model or another, may have missed the point. It seems to me that a Gricean model does not have to insist that we process literal and implied meaning separately any more than general linguistics assumes that we process phonology separately from morphology, syntax or semantics. The reality is integrated. But if we try to produce an integrated model of such complex data, no systematic or testable insights will be generated and the model will be unable to explain anything about the data. Here are Sperber and Wilson making the case against Gricean pragmatics on precisely these grounds:

a. Peter: What do you think of Martin’s latest novel?
b. Mary: It puts me to sleep.

In Grice’s framework, Mary’s utterance in should have three distinct interpretations: as a literal assertion, a hyperbole or a metaphor. Of these, Peter should test the literal interpretation first, and move to a figurative interpretation only if the literal interpretation blatantly violates the maxim of truthfulness. Yet there is now a lot of experimental evidence suggesting that literal interpretations do not have to be tested and rejected before figurative interpretations are considered; indeed, in interpreting (13b), it would probably not even occur to Peter to wonder whether Mary literally fell asleep. (Sperber and Wilson , 2004 p.268)

I am not theorising here about cognitive processing of utterances, but the same points seem to me to be relevant, whether one is concerned with core linguistic meaning (phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics) or with situated utterance comprehension. Rigour in explanation is what helps us to move forward in understanding this most complex of human behaviours and this depends more often than not on separating out strands for detailed examination. Once the individual strands are well described, there can also be models produced which examine the interfaces between these strands. These can also be rigorously tested of course once precise hypotheses have been produced.

2. What we know about texts

Before I describe what I mean by textual meaning, let us consider what a language user knows about texts. I will begin this section with the most general question of what human language encompasses, so that textual meaning can be fitted into that larger picture. Whilst there are clearly some links between language and other forms of communication (body language, visual imagery, artistic expression through, e.g., music or dance), this is one case where my points (above) about clarity of purpose and ability to make progress are relevant. Whilst there are people working effectively on all of these aspects, and others, there remain unanswered questions about the core aspects of linguistic communication which still merit investigation.

I have written elsewhere about this (Jeffries 2014a/b and 2015 a/b), but I would like to reiterate my conviction that it is useful to identify at least three general aspects of human (linguistic) communication which language users are drawing on as producers and responding to as recipients. These, I would suggest, can helpfully be studied separately, and often are in practice. Despite the best efforts of some scholars to integrate them into a single layered model, many researchers in linguistics continue to find it most productive to delve into their own specialist field, for understandable reasons of scope and expertise. Other researchers have travelled in the opposite direction, attempting to encompass all aspects of a communicative act into their descriptions and theorising (e.g. Harris 1999; Toolan 1996). The results of this latter process are varied, but they can result in the almost unwitting setting aside of some of the most basic knowledge about linguistic structure and meaning. This may be based on the wholly defensible idea that it is impossible to describe everything at once, but the point is not normally made explicitly and the consequence is not always a focussed, rigorous study of a well-defined phenomenon. The danger of claiming such comprehensiveness, whilst risking the eclipsing of decades of progress in linguistic description, is that some of the earliest mistakes in understanding how language works may be replicated as a result.

Some of the work coming from CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis) reflects this concern about losing insights from linguistics. Though there are no doubt many insights of value in the work, I find the so-called 'methods' are often lacking in the kind of detail that would enable me to see how their conclusions are reached. Here is a fairly typical account of what CDA is supposed to be about:

Critical discourse analysis, (...) oscillates between a focus on structure and a focus on action – between a focus on shifts in the social structuring of semiotic diversity (orders of discourse), and a focus on the productive semiotic work which goes on in particular texts and interactions. In both perspectives, a central concern is shifting articulations between genres, discourses and styles – the shifting social structuring of relationships between them which achieve a relative stability and permanence in orders of discourse, and the ongoing working of relationships between them in texts and interactions. (Fairclough 2001:124)

Whilst some of the new 'theories' that are used in those fields produce interesting observations, these can be at the expense of other more testable insights with longevity from linguistic science. I do not want to critique such ideas in detail here, for reasons of space, but they share the main fault, in my view, of not making clear how their categories and labels can be linked to the text in any consistent or transparent way. The danger of this development links to similar developments in literary studies: The analyst may end up using his or her intuitive understanding of the text being investigated and simply assert that this or that 'feature' associated with the theory is present. Such a lack of textual evidencing of supposed theoretical constructs produces descriptions of data (texts) which tacitly assume that textual meaning is transparent and anyone with the right skills can decode it. Of course, this is precisely what discourse analysts (and literary scholars) would claim not to be doing, but the reality is that unless the source of labels being attached to textual features can be clearly identified as evidence, and questioned by other researchers, the analysis is in danger of being performed as a kind of 'tour de force' rather than being offered as a potential, testable and therefore mutable description of the language being used.

Michael Halliday (see Halliday and Mattheissen 2004) is one of those who has attempted to build a single unified model and his Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) in some ways could be seen as an example of a framework trying to do too many things at once. Despite these misgivings, one of the most useful contributions from his work, in my opinion, is the three-way metafunction distinction he makes between textual, ideational and interpersonal meaning. I would like to build on his distinction to elaborate where I see the place of textual meaning to be in a general model of human language. Rather than seeing the metafunctions as linked to linguistic forms and systems themselves, however, I would see them more closely linked to the level of abstraction of the linguistic features concerned. Thus, instead of conceiving of two semantico-syntactic systems, such as transitivity and modality, as being formally at the same level but meta-functioning in different ways (ideationally and interpersonally respectively), I propose instead that systems at the same level operate in the same meta-functional way. Thus, noun phrase/group and verb phrase/group structures both form part of the linguistic underpinning to the language (Halliday's textual metafunction), whilst transitivity and modality operate at a textual level, producing ideation, and systems like speech acts or Gricean maxims operate at the interpersonal level.

What Halliday calls the textual metafunction, I wish to rename 'linguistic' meaning (covering forms and functions). This is the abstract and de-contextual centre of linguistic structure and meaning, and includes the kind of topics you find in the core linguistics modules on any undergraduate course: Phonetics, Phonology, Morphology, Syntax, Semantics. These are, of course, idealised abstractions from actual language use, and there are compromises made by such descriptions, with the variation on geographical, gender, social and other grounds often neutralised or backgrounded in the resulting descriptions. However, this is not the 'ideal speaker-hearer' of Chomsky's imagination (1965), since the same kind of (rigorous) linguistic descriptions of these variations can also be made, as we see from the large body of work in sociolinguistics.

What Halliday calls the ideational metafunction equates to what I call textual meaning. His framework links ideation particularly to transitivity and this is a central component of textual meaning in my model too, drawing on his and others' work in this field. Textual meaning is the co-textual effect of how the structures produced by the underlying linguistic systems work. This level of description answers the question of what the text is doing in creating an ideational 'world'. We will see some examples below which will make this intermediate level of meaning clearer. The final type of meaning is the fully contextual, or interpersonal, meaning. For me, this encompasses pragmatics and answers the question of what the language is doing to/with the people in the situation, rather than how it is helping recipients to create a mental image of the world it describes.

So, let us come back to the question that I raised at the beginning of this section: What do language users know about texts? Well of course a competent language user will know about the sounds, morphemic structure, syntax and semantics of his/her language. This may be a standard language or a dialect, but there will be some core information that the user knows. S/he will also know about how texts work to create meaning over and above the semantic. This is the level that I call textual meaning and it is the one that I think stylistics in its broadest sense is concerned with. Then s/he will know about how the text is being used in a situational context and will use pragmatic knowledge to understand what is being done with the language that has been used.

These different levels of meaning – linguistic, textual (ideational) and interpersonal – all run concurrently, just like the lower levels within each of these meta-levels. So, we are processing phonology, morphology and syntax at the same time, without this apparently indicating that it takes three times the effort or three times the length of time. Similarly with the three meta-levels. We are processing linguistic, textual and interpersonal meaning at the same time, but this does not in itself amount to a claim about the amount of cognitive activity we are performing, just a way to separate out the different aspects of what may in fact be chemically or biologically a single action.

3. A theory of textual meaning

I would be critical of those who use the word 'theory' too loosely without providing any testable hypotheses arising from the putative theory, and I am therefore also wary of suggesting that what I am proposing is a theory. Nevertheless, I wish to suggest that whatever the overall theory of human language looks like, text should have a place at the centre of linguistics and this requires some theoretical projections. I have also been forthright about the need for rigour in linguistic description, so I will try to make clear below how the illustrations of textual meaning link to the text, and how they can be separated from linguistic and from interpersonal meaning, to demonstrate their viability as descriptive apparatus.

What I propose to do in the remainder of this article is to use the 'textual conceptual functions' (TCFs) from my critical stylistics framework (Jeffries 2010b) as the basis of an account of textual meaning. I have illustrated them copiously in relation to ideology in that book, so here I will choose a range of ideational meaning, not all of it necessarily ideologically loaded. Before embarking on this task, however, I would like to comment on the status of this descriptive framework in relation to the question of whose meaning we are discussing. There are logically at least three loci of meaning that we might be interested in. There is the meaning of the producer, the meaning of the text and the meaning of the recipient. There may, of course, also be others who have different perspectives such as Goffman's (1981) eavesdroppers and overhearers or anachronistic readers of historical texts and there is certainly the possibility that readers/recipients may have more than one interpretation (Jeffries 2001) of a text on different occasions, or even simultaneously. But these depend on all the personal, historical and contextual features that many other scholars are working on and I wish to focus on the textual meaning as a separate strand. I will argue that there is a useful sense in which we can talk about textual meaning and that the proof of this being separ*able*, if not always separate in fact from producer and recipient meaning, is that the textual meaning may not be immediately accessible to the producer or recipient and is often, therefore, at a sub-conscious level for the participants themselves.

I hope that the discussion of some examples below will demonstrate that with the help of a framework of this kind, it is possible to describe fairly consistently what is going on textually which is dependent on, but different from, what is going on linguistically and informs, but does not determine, what is going on interpersonally – or interpretatively.

4. Textual-conceptual functions

I do not propose to explain the TCFs in any detail here as there are now a number of published accounts of them available (see, for example, Jeffries 2010b, 2014b). For the same reason, I will not, this time, take each of them in turn and try to isolate the specific meaning attaching just to that TCF. There are many such examples in other publications. Instead, I will examine a small number of examples in detail, explaining the relevant TCFs and how they work together to produce textual meaning. At the same time, I will attempt to make clear the relationship between the textual meaning, the linguistic meaning and any interpersonal (or interpretative) meaning that is evident in the context.

4.1 Naming, negation and opposition

Naming is ubiquitous in texts. There is a sense in which texts are largely divided between what is named (things, people, abstractions) and what processes they are involved in (events, actions etc.). In the following example, the more intermittent occurrence of the TCFs of constructed opposition and negation (Nahajec 2009) is paired with naming to create an interpersonal moment in the lives of characters in a well-known sit-com (*The Big Bang Theory*)[2]:

Penny gives Sheldon a Christmas gift. Sheldon: “No, Penny! I know you think you’re being generous but the foundation of gift giving is reciprocity. You haven’t given me a gift, you’ve given me *an obligation.*”

Here, the statement “You haven’t given me a gift, you’ve given me *an obligation.*” can be understood linguistically as a pair of clauses in a complex sentence, with parallel structures consisting of Subject, Predicator, Indirect Object, Direct Object in each case. In addition, the first clause is negated by the addition of the particle ‘not’ to the auxiliary verb have and except for the direct objects, the lexical items are identical (you, have, given, me). The direct objects are both noun phrases with indefinite articles and a head noun in each case. The semantics of the clauses are likewise parallel, apart from the negation of the first clause and refer to two people, identified by the first and second pronouns (you, me) and a transaction between these people which is referred to by the di-transitive verb give.

In textual terms, the negation of the first clause and the foregrounded differences between the two direct objects as a result of the parallelism work together to set up the expectation that their referents will be in a relationship of opposition. This creates a world view which the audience will ascribe to Sheldon in which a gift is a good thing with no consequences for the recipient, whereas an obligation is full of consequences. In Sheldon’s world, the two are incompatible, so if gift-giving produces an obligation to reciprocate, then this very fact creates a paradox whereby the gift can no longer, in fact, *be* a gift. For Penny, Sheldon’s interlocutor in this scene, this produces offence as she does not see the obligation that Sheldon claims is the result of her action. The interpersonal aspect of this utterance, then, would be described by pragmaticians by reference to the offence caused, innocently, by Sheldon because of his system of values which clashes with the socially prevailing one, where he should thank Penny and keep quiet about any obligation that he may see as following from her act.

The table below may help to summarise these separate strands of meaning:

Utterance → **Meaning type ↓**	*You haven’t given me a gift, you’ve given me an obligation*
Linguistic	P has not given S something (a gift), P has given S something (an obligation)
Textual (ideational)	S sees gifts and obligations as theoretically oppositional (and paradoxically linked).

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[2] I have chosen all my examples from this TV series (*The Big Bang Theory*), to illustrate that TCFs and textual meaning as a whole works in texts that are very different from those I have used elsewhere in illustrating, for example, political meaning. Most of the examples used here can be found very easily by searching online.

Interpersonal	S is explicitly offended by the obligation he perceives as following from the gift-giving and P is likely to be offended by S's lack of 'normal' response to gift-giving. The latter is confirmed by her response as she tries to take back the gift.

Note that the claim I am making about textual meaning is that there is likely to be agreement between Sheldon and Penny about the ideational meaning attached to his statement. Thus, without agreeing with him, Penny is obliged to accept that he sees the world differently to her (and by implication to the rest of society) in that he makes explicit a consequence of gift-giving (i.e. obligation) that others prefer to leave unstated, even if they sometimes feel the same way. The audience, who might be seen as similar in nature to Goffman's (1981) overhearers, may be amused by the mismatch in A and B's understanding of the transaction and The Big Bang Theory depends for its humour on many such mismatches of ideation.

4.2 Transitivity, Prioritising, Negation, Modality and Enumerating

Like naming, transitivity is also ubiquitous as it refers to the choice of verb in *each* clause. This is not simply a question of semantics, but of the kinds of process that the text presents. In the following example, the transitivity choices, combined with negation and listing, create an ideational scenario in which high value is placed on not being pestered verbally and on a quality (*zazziness*) that appears to be invented:

Sheldon is suddenly obsessed by cats and brings a large number of them into the apartment. "Cats make wonderful companions. They don't argue or question my intellectual authority and this little guy here, I think you'll find to be quite zazzy."

The linguistic analysis of the final sentence above would describe three clauses, two of which have 'cats' as their grammatical subject and are coordinated (using *or*) with an implied (elided) subject in the second. These two subjects are followed by a negated intransitive verb (*don't argue*) and an (implicitly negated) transitive verb (*question*) respectively, the second followed by an object noun phrase (*my intellectual authority*). The third clause changes structure as it has a fronted grammatical object (*this little guy here*), the speaker (*I*) as subject with the verb *think* followed by two further subordinate clauses with second person (*you*) as subject of *find* and the cats (again subject to ellipsis) as subject of *be*. The final clause element of the most subordinate clause is an adjectival complement which appears to be an invented word: *zazzy*.

The textual analysis of this same sentence would be based on the propositions arising from the linguistic analysis, but would focus on what kind of ideation is being produced. So, what we have is a three-part 'list' of clauses, implying that Sheldon (as usual) has the last word on the topic under discussion because three-part lists are conceptualised as complete. However, the three clauses are not parallel in structure or complexity. The first two are typical of Sheldon's categorical style (i.e. they are unmodalised and therefore more quietly certain than a modal version would be). This assured – sometimes even arrogant – style is typical of Sheldon's character, but the final clause is entirely unlike him, which is part of why the scene is amusing to the audience. This clause is modalised (I think; you'll find) to show that Sheldon is more vulnerable and uncertain than he normally seems. This clause is also structured in a complex way, as we saw in the linguistic description, with two layers of subordination below the main clause (I think) so that the assertion of the cat's zazziness ends up being at the third level of subordination. Not only does Sheldon show his vulnerability by using modality, then, but he also puts his assertion (the cat is zazzy) at a very low, and therefore relatively unimportant, level of structure. The intermediate clause (you'll find) is not only modal (being related to future time) but it is also a sign that Sheldon, who is not normally a good communicator, is willing to share the experience of the cat with his interlocutors. In addition to the change in structure, the first two sentences use negation to conjure up an alternative 'world' in which cats – or some others - DO argue and question his authority, which like many negated propositions, produces the notion that such verbalisations as arguing and questioning are expected as the norm for his life. The implicature (interpersonally) is that the human beings around Sheldon are a nuisance in just this way. The third sentence changes structure, polarity (it is positive) and also transitivity. The meaningful verb (at the bottom of all the layers of structure) is to be and it brings Sheldon's sentence to a more restful conclusion, as he describes the quality of this cat using the relational intensive copula.

The interpersonal side of this sentence has already been hinted at. Sheldon is indirectly criticising his best friend and his mother for actively interfering in his life. He wants companionship without challenge and the cats – particularly the zazzy one – provide just such society.

Utterance → **Meaning type ↓**	*They don't argue or question my intellectual authority and this little guy here, I think you'll find to be quite zazzy*
Linguistic	S asserts that cats don't argue or question his intellectual authority and that one in particular has the quality of being 'zazzy'
Textual (ideational)	S uses negation to imply that others (people? specific people?) DO argue and question his intellectual authority. He uses a three-part list to create the impression that this is all that needs to be said on the matter of cats. The transitivity choices show that verbalisation is not valued highly whereas having a (positive) quality (Intensive Relational) is naturalised as being of high value. The complex structure of the third sentence is also doubly modalised at the two higher levels and this indicates a more self-doubting and less arrogant side of Sheldon, which is rarely seen. It also connects him to the others as he indicates that he expects they will find the cat just as *zazzy* as he does.
Interpersonal	S is talking in the presence of his mother (M) and his housemate (L), both of whom are implicated as people who argue and question his authority and are thereby criticised. So there is scope for offence here.

The audience (overhearers?) is likely to find the juxtaposition of the first two items in the list with the final item, funny. This is partly on the basis of their prior knowledge of the character, Sheldon, who is much more likely to make the first two points than to show his own vulnerability and affection for a creature as he does in the final item.

4.3 Discourse presentation, negation, opposition neutralisation

The following extract takes place in a restaurant between Sheldon and his girlfriend, Amy. He is under pressure to be more actively romantic, which does not fit with his rational, scientific character. But this time he appears to have chosen the right words:

Sheldon: "Amy. When I look in your eyes and you're looking back in mine, everything feels not quite normal. Because I feel stronger and weaker at the same time. I feel excited and at the same time, terrified. The truth is, I don't know what I feel except I know what kind of man I want to be."

Sheldon is here apparently addressing Amy directly. We could analyse the structures and semantics of the speech here, but let us focus instead on the textual meaning. Sheldon creates a world in which conventional mutually exclusive opposites such as strength and weakness can co-exist. Similarly with excitement and fear (terrified). He also uses negation (not quite normal and I don't know what I feel) which conjures up the expectation of feeling normal and knowing how one feels. So, in every way, Sheldon is telling Amy that when he looks in her eyes the world changes fundamentally. This is a common trope used by lovers to show how much power the beloved has; to alter the basis of the world.

The regular viewer of this show will be surprised (and pleased for Amy) on hearing Sheldon apparently coming out with such a heartfelt declaration of love. But both audience and girlfriend are let down by what follows:

Amy: "Sheldon, that was beautiful."
Sheldon: "I should hope so, that's from the first Spiderman movie."

The joke, in this case, is that Sheldon's only way of rising to the challenge of being a suitably romantic boyfriend is to plagiarise from a film and then immediately admit to having done so. The interpersonal aspects of this sequence of utterances, then, are the raising of expectations on Amy's part, followed by the dashing of her fantasies when he admits they are not his own words. The conventions of speech presentation include the idea that being faithful to the original words is important, but only when they are also credited to the original speaker. Sheldon does both, but in the wrong order, so that for a moment, the audience and Amy are transported to a hypothetical world in which he is capable of poetic love declarations.

Conclusion: Stylistics at the core

The previous section attempted to spell out very specific aspects of meaning that are inherent in the texts that I was describing. These aspects of ideation, I would argue, are likely to be commonly accepted (though often subconsciously) as being part of the meaning of the text, whatever the personal viewpoints or ideologies of the participants. This is one of the reasons why advertising, propaganda and persuasive language have some chance of winning the recipient(s) over. There is a sense in which the reader/hearer of a piece of language has no choice but to temporarily suspend their own viewpoints and assumptions and to enter the world of the text. They may or may not recognise the ideation (and ideology) consciously and they may or may not agree or contest the version of the world that the text contains, but for the purposes of processing language, they have to accept the world construction as it is given in the text.

The TCFs that form part of critical stylistics as a framework are an attempt to bring together those concepts which have a relatively stable set of realisations and which produce a particular structuring dimension for the text world. This includes what kinds of things are negated, hypothesised or opposed, who/what are the actors and who/what the goals of processes; what kinds of assumptions and implications are being made; which propositions are main (i.e. high in the structure) and which are either less important or more taken for granted (i.e. lower in the structure) and so on.

The examples used here to illustrate this approach were chosen from a set of potential extracts on the basis that they each illustrated a range of TCFs working together and across the set, most of the TCFs were represented at some point. The development of a theoretical approach of this kind depends on repeated testing of the ideas being developed and any counterexamples which show that the ideas don't work will contribute to the refinement – or even possibly the abandonment of the theory and its associated framework. What I have tried to demonstrate through the analyses above is the simple idea that what I am calling textual meaning is demonstrably distinct from linguistic meaning on the one hand (i.e. the basic semantic-syntactic meaning) and from interpersonal meaning on the other hand (i.e. what pragmatics would have to say about the context and resulting personalised meaning). The rigour invoked here is that of deductive reasoning, not inductive processes. The latter would require the collection and description of a well-defined set of data, in order to establish what that data set contained and to test the framework that is being used. This would be a very sensible next step in the testing of the ideas I have expounded here. At the moment, I am trying out these ideas on a range of different text types to see how far the concept of textual meaning can be applied and whether any texts arise that challenge its very basis.

To sum up, my work in this field is the culmination of a thought process which started when I began to call myself a stylistician. I was working with text, but that very activity was marginalised and not seen as central to linguistic endeavours. There was a sense in which 'literary stylistics' was seen as neither linguistics nor literary studies and as a result it belonged on the margins of both and was central to neither. Likewise, non-literary stylistics has not been incorporated readily into discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis. Attempting to make space amongst all the descriptive frameworks of linguistics for a specifically textual level of meaning, which ascribes characteristics to the world it describes, has been my aim, whether that world is fictional, historical, real or hypothetical. There is much still to do on this topic, but I think it will reward further study.

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