

# 40 Literary Pragmatics

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JACOB L. MEY

## 0 Introduction: Author and Reader

Human language activity unfolds mainly along the two dimensions of the spoken and the written word. The former is commonly known as “conversation”; the latter comprises (but not exclusively) what is often referred to as “literature.” Together, they constitute the principal ways in which humans produce **text**. In addition to the spoken, **oral** text, with its corresponding competence (often called “orality” or “oracy”), there are the written productions (mainly **literary** texts) that are the subject of the present chapter.

Along with human oral competence, we thus encounter the phenomenon of “literacy,” interpreted either as the simple ability to read and write, or as the actual production and consumption of written texts. As long as the emphasis is on language as it is *spoken* (especially in conversation), the role of pragmatics does not seem to be in doubt (witness the inclusion of topics such as “conversation analysis” in most current handbooks); the question up for discussion in the present chapter is whether pragmatic findings can be assigned any validity or explanatory significance for literary production as well.

Recently, an increasing interest in the pragmatics of literary texts has been making itself felt across the disciplines of both literary science and linguistics. The magisterial synthesis provided by Fludernik in her 1993 book was followed by another milestone work by the same author in 1996. Earlier, the work by Banfield (with all its “sound and fury,” as McHale characterized the reception of this work in 1983) had been followed by incisive studies such as the one by Ehrlich (1990). Lesser-known studies, as well as older ones, did not fail to make their impact, either; suffice it to name works by Iser (1978), Cohn (1978), or the original narratological-theoretical works by people like Genette (1980), Stanzel (1982), and Bal (1985), and of course the gigantic earlier efforts by literary critics such as Horkheimer, Benjamin, Kermode, Hillis Miller, Fish, and others. Add to this the ongoing discussions on literary-pragmatic subjects (such as is carried on in the pages of *Poetics Today*, *Poetics*, *Text*, and other journals), and efforts toward comprehensive theory such as that undertaken recently by Tsur (1992), and one cannot escape the conclusion that the debates are not just about

peripheral questions such as to how to interpret this poem or that piece of prose, but that something more is afoot: the question of literature as such, and what it is doing in our lives. After all, books are there to be read; literature is for users to peruse. Saying that, we have also planted ourselves *in mediis rebus pragmaticis*: if literature is for the users, and the use of language is what determines pragmatics, then literary pragmatics is the expression not just of a trendy tendency, but of some deeper need for clarification of the relationships between humans, their words, and their worlds.

In keeping with the general definition of pragmatics that I have formulated elsewhere (cf. Mey 2000: section 1.2), the question "What is the significance of pragmatics for the study of written text?" or more broadly "How do literature and pragmatics relate?" has to be seen from the angle of the **language user**. But who is this user, when it comes to literature?

At first glance, we seem to recognize the **reader** as the user *par excellence*: it is he or she who acquires the products of someone else's literary activity, and by consuming ("reading") them, satisfies a personal need (and indirectly provides the author, the producer of the text, with a living). As I have argued elsewhere (Mey 1994, 1995), this relationship is not just one of buying and selling a regular commodity; authors and readers, while being distinguished by their different positions on the supply and demand sides of the literary market, have more in common than your regular sellers and buyers. It is this commonality, and the resulting *cooperation* between authors and readers, which makes the world of literary producing and consuming different from a regular marketplace.

Reading is a collaborative activity, taking place between author and reader. The work that the author has done in producing the text has to be supplemented and completed by you, the reader. You do not just buy a book: you buy an author to take home with you. Reading is a cooperative process of **active re-creation**, not just the passive, preset and predetermined use of some "recreational facility." As a contemporary novelist has expressed it succinctly: "[A novel] is made in the head, and has to be remade in the head by whoever reads it, who will always remake it differently" (Byatt 1996: 214). The reader, as an active collaborator, is a major player in the literary game. His or her contribution consists in entering the universe that the author has created, and by doing so, becoming an actor, rather than a mere spectator. As a result, we do not only have cooperation, but also *innovation*. By acting the reader changes the play: what the reader reads is, in the final analysis, his or her own coproduction along with the author. I call this interaction a **dialectic** process (see Mey 1994, 1999: sections 11.2, 12.3), inasmuch as the author depends on the reader as a presupposition for his or her activity, and the reader is dependent on the author for guidance in the world of fiction, for the "script" that he or she has to internalize in order to successfully take part in the play, have his or her "ways with words," to borrow a felicitous expression due to Shirley Brice Heath (1988).

The pragmatic study of literary activity focuses on the features that characterize this dialectic aspect of literary production: the text as an author-originated and -guided, but at the same time reader-oriented and -activated, process of wording. The reader is constrained by the limitations of the text; but also, the text provides the necessary degrees of freedom in which the reader can collaborate with the author to construct the proper textual universe, one that is consonant with the broader contextual conditions that mark the world and times in which the reader lives.

In the following, I will take a closer look at the mechanisms that language makes available to realize this joint textual production.

## 1 Author and Narrator

In her novel *A república dos sonhos* (*The Republic of Dreams*), the Brazilian author Nélida Piñon (1984) tells the story of an old woman, Eulália's, last days. Telling this story implies giving an account of Eulália's long life, an account which is provided through "flashbacks" and retrospective narrative, attributed, among others, to a young woman, Eulália's granddaughter Breta.

In telling her story, Breta assumes a double narrative perspective: for one, she lets the life story unfold through the voice of her grandmother (as "heard" by Breta herself); in addition, she tells us how she experienced her grandmother's final hours. Neither of these narrative levels is directly linked to the *author* of the book: Piñon speaks, as it were, through the voice of her characters, among which Breta is the central figure. Breta is given a crucial part in the telling of the story, the process of narrating; Breta is a major narrative "voice," distinct from the author's own. But there is more.

Toward the end of the book, Breta remarks to herself that, when all the funeral fuss is over, she will sit down and tell the story of what happened in grandma's bedroom – that is, the story she just has been telling us! Breta the narrator suddenly becomes another person: Breta the author. This new author has, so to speak, caught us unawares in a flying start, organized by the "real" author, Nélida Piñon. Before we have had time to realize it, we have already met the author Breta, who enters the fictional world of *The Republic of Dreams* to become the new, so to say "prospective," narrator in the literary universe created by the "real" author. Thus, Breta is at the same time an author *and* a narrator; however, she can only be this by the grace of the real author and, as we will see, by the reader's active acceptance of this division of roles. (I will have more to say on this in section 3.)

What this case makes clear is the important difference that exists in a literary production between author and narrator. The author creates the narrator, whether or not the latter explicitly manifests himself or herself on the narrative scene. Either way, the narrator is a "character" in the story, a character, furthermore, who cannot be held responsible for the actions and opinions of the other characters.

The pragmatic relevance of the distinction between author and narrator is in the different approach that the readers have toward the production and consumption of a piece of text. It is important for the readers to realize that the narrator's persona does not identify with that of any of the other characters. Neither (and I would say a fortiori) can the author be identified with the actions and opinions of the characters; which explains the occurrence of the familiar disclaimers on the inside of the front cover of novels, to the effect that "all the characters occurring in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to any living persons is purely coincidental."

Such statements need not be "true," in the sense that the author may indeed have drawn on actually existing persons, sometimes even letting this fact be known, by subtle or not-so-subtle hints, as in the roman à clef. The point is that while a writer, as

a narrator, may be permitted to actually portray her or his persons as real characters, as an author (crudely defined as the person who gets the royalties), she or he is not allowed to reproduce actual experiences when depicting living persons unfavorably; doing so would inevitably result in a costly lawsuit for libel. Modifying D. H. Lawrence's famous quip (quoted by Toolan 1994: 88), "Never trust the teller, trust the tale," we could say, "Never trust the narrator (or author); trust the text, and your own abilities as a reader to make sense of it."

As we see, the pragmatics of authorship vs. "narratorship" are of the utmost importance for the successful cooperation between the users involved in the production and consumption of the literary work. Narrativity, however defined, is always a pragmatic quality of both readers and texts, and of the interplay between the two. The next section will go into some detail as to the textual mechanics of these pragmatic presuppositions. (Cf. Mey 2000: section 7.2.3.)

## 2 Textual Mechanisms

How do readers use the textual mechanisms mentioned above in their efforts to understand a text, as it has been situated in place, time, and discourse by the author? I will start out by discussing the phenomena of place and person reference (mainly deixis); next, I will have something to say on time/tense and discourse.

### 2.1 Reference

Consider the following extract: ". . . he returned home only to find her the wife of his hated cousin and mother of many little ones with his features but not his" (Byatt 1992: 176). This is said about a sailor who has been to sea for many years, and whose return was not expected – least of all by his wife, who had remarried a cousin of her husband's (referred to as "hated" in the extract). The marriage had been successful, one could say, at least in the way of fertility (hence the "many little ones"); but to the original husband, the sight of all these children bearing the features of the despised cousin rather than (being) his own<sup>1</sup> must have been pretty appalling.

All this information we glean without special difficulty just by quickly perusing the above text. Yet, the phrase "many little ones with his features but not his," taken by itself, sounds a little odd, not to say contradictory; out of its context, it is not easy to understand. In particular, the double occurrence of the personal pronoun *his* cannot be determined using linguistic rules of deixis; the correct assignment of reference depends entirely on the context.

The question is now: what precisely is this context, and how do we go about interpreting it?

Our understanding of the fictional world is contingent upon our acceptance of the author as an "authority," as an *auctor* in the classical sense: a creator, one who speaks the word by which the creatures become alive, or at least one who, having been "present at the Creation" (cf. Proverbs 8), is allowed to act as a major mouthpiece for the creative force. By entering the world of the text, by becoming participants in the

drama enacted in the narrative, we become at the same time understanders of the ways in which the personae interact, and how they are textually referred to. In this particular case, many of us have read about, maybe even known, people who were assumed to have died and still came back “from the dead,” as the expression goes; post-Holocaust Europe was full of happenings like these. Such an understanding is prior to, and conditions, any further or deeper understanding of the text; the establishment of the correct references (such as the two occurrences of “his” in the above passage from Byatt) is a consequence of such an understanding, not its effective cause.

Having seen how the textual world is both pragmatically dependent upon, and preconditional to, the establishment of linguistic reference, let us now spend a few moments considering the problem of **tense** in a literary text.

## 2.2 Tense

When it comes to the use of tense in literary works, the situation is no different from that surrounding deixis. Again, the question is how to use the resources that the language puts at our disposal in order to understand the text, in this case to determine who is saying what at which point of time in the narrative. The so-called **indexical** function of tense may be considered as a means of situating an utterance in time relative to a user. (See Mey 1999: ch. 3.)

A simple schema is that proposed by Ehrlich (1990), following the classical distinction introduced by the logician Hans Reichenbach in the 1940s (Reichenbach 1947). Ehrlich establishes the following distinctions: First, we have the time at which the utterance is spoken: this is “speech time” (ST). Then, there is the time at which the event that is spoken about took place: this is called “event time” (ET). And finally, we have the time that is indicated by the temporal indicators of the utterance (that is to say, both verbal tense morphemes and adverbs of time). This “temporal perspective” is called “reference time” (RT).

To show the contrast between the different “times,” as expressed by these temporal indicators, Ehrlich provides the following example (1990: 61):

John had already completed his paper last week.

Here, “the RT is last week, the ET is an unspecified time prior to last week, and the ST occurs after both RT and ET” (*ibid.*).

What this example does not show is the influence that a possible *context* may have on the use of tense. In a context of use, the various relations between RT, ST, and ET may well be disrupted, such that we only can understand what is going on by appealing to our understanding of the *pragmatic* world in which the interplay between the tenses is taking place. It is a bit like what happens when we are confronted with so-called “flashbacks” in a novel or on the screen. A story unfolds in (event) time, but suddenly the time perspective is broken, and events anterior to those related are “intercalated,” inserted into the stream of events, thus establishing a different time reference (sometimes, but not necessarily, accompanied by a change in time of “speaking”). In such cases, the morphemes of tense are not always sufficient by themselves to shore up a tottering, broken, or “unvoiced” narrative (Mey 1999: section 7.3).

Moreover, while most languages cannot do without some morphological indication of time (such as is embodied in the category of tense and its indexical function), its use may vary enormously from language to language. Naturally, this can cause complications for our understanding of a text, especially in those cases where the translator is not aware of the intricate differences between the grammars of different languages. Here's an example in which a translated tense misfires: in the beginning of Mikhail Bulgakov's classical satirical novel *Master i Margarita* (*The Master and Margarita*), two gentlemen (one of them called Ivan) appear on the scene, walking and talking with each other in a Moscow park. Their discussion is interrupted by the purchase of some soft drinks at a nearby stand, and by a momentary fit of dizziness, accompanied by a hallucinatory experience, on the part of Ivan. When things are back to normal, we are told that:

... – povel rec, prervannuju pit'em abrikosovoj.  
Rec èta, kak vposledstvie uznali, sla ob Isuse Xriste.

(... – [he (sc. Ivan)] continued the discussion interrupted by the drinking of the apricot soda.

This conversation, as we learned subsequently, was about Jesus Christ.)  
(Bulgakov 1969: 8; Engl. transl. 1967: 5).

On reading this fragment in its English translation, the baffled reader asks himself or herself how to reconcile the two conflicting time indications expressed here. The time adverb "subsequently" refers to a point of time in the future. This reference time (RT) is posterior to "event time" (ET), that is, it must occur some time after the events depicted in the preceding passage; more specifically, after the two interruptions in the gentlemen's conversation, caused by soda drinking and hallucinating. In contrast, speech time (ST) and event time (ET) are simultaneous, the conversation occurring more or less at ET.

By any account, the RT established by "learned" (a past tense) has to be *prior* to ET, according to the rules for the use of the past tense in English (and in most languages), and hence would exclude the use of an adverb such as "subsequently," denoting *posterior* time. This conundrum can only be solved by appealing to the understanding that we have of the situation: the conversation (about whose content we have not been informed so far) will, at a future point of time (RT), be disclosed as having had to do (at ET/ST) with the person of Jesus Christ. This is what our common "readerly" sense tells us has to be the meaning of this obscure passage.

The example analyzed here shows two things:

- 1 The occurrence of a linguistic anomaly (such as a verbal past tense combined with a future time adverbial) can only be explained by reference to a larger frame of narration in which such a combination makes sense. This is the "readerly," *pragmatic* interpretation of the difficulty.
- 2 While the occurrence of a particular linguistic form is not sufficient, by itself, to make the correct inferences, linguistic forms are certainly a much-needed help in the analysis of a text's pragmatic content.<sup>2</sup>

Let us now have a look at how textual understanding is made possible in the totality of contextual conditions that are often subsumed under the general appellation of **discourse**.

### 2.3 *Discourse*

Discourse has been defined as “the ensemble of phenomena in and through which social production of meaning takes place” (Mumby and Stohl 1991: 315). Since a text, in my understanding, is a typically *social* product, created by users in an environment of socially determined conditions, discourse (in the sense defined above) looms large in all textual interpretation. The “ensemble of phenomena” referred to by Mumby and Stohl is what I call the **universe of discourse**; it comprises, but not exclusively, the phenomena usually dealt with in logic or linguistics, the latter comprising such phenomena as the earlier discussed deixis and tense.

However, the discourse aspect of a text is not just a passive one, a reader being (more or less successfully) entertained by an author; on the contrary, the success of the text depends on the reader’s active collaboration in creating the textual universe (cf. Mey 1995). The reader is party to the textual discourse as much as is the author: only in the “meeting of their heads” (varying Byatt’s expression quoted above) will the real story be successfully delivered and see the light of day.

In this readerly process of (self-)activation, the key word is *credibility*: the author has to establish a universe of discourse that the reader is willing to accept on the writer’s “author-ity”; that authority in its turn is dependent on how skillfully the author manages to arrange the events and persons she or he is depicting, and how cleverly she or he manages to assign the characters their proper “voices,” as we will see in the next section. Just as the time of the narrative event need not coincide either with “real” time, or with time as it proceeds, in orderly fashion, through our lives, so the levels of narration need not coincide with those of reality. Our knowledge about what can happen in narrative is conditioned by our cultural and social presuppositions, as well as by the particular “contract” that we enter into upon opening a novel; in other words, by the totality of discourse, in the sense defined above.

But how are readers able to “find their feet,” to know where they are in the narration? How can they hold on to the thread of a narrative despite many hitches and breaks? In this connection, the all-important question that readers must ask themselves at any given point of the narrative is whose “voice” they are hearing. The next section will deal with this question in detail.

## 3 Voice and “Point of View”

As we have seen, readerly control of the narration’s vagaries is sustained though a variety of devices, some of which are linguistic, while others belong to the domain of “reader pragmatics.” Among the latter, there is one that stands out by its importance and frequent use: the phenomenon recognized as “focalization,” “voice,” or “point of view.” Despite its importance for the analysis and understanding of text, this contextual

device has found no accepted place in the deliberations of those pragmatically oriented researchers who hail from various linguistic backgrounds: in most cases, their span of attention is limited by the purely grammatical, cotextual phenomena.

In the traditional view, authors create a text by inventing some characters, who then proceed to act out some series of events, called "stories." The characters are the author's "creatures": we attribute the creational origin of a particular character (e.g. Huckleberry Finn) to its creator, a particular author (here Samuel Clemens, a.k.a. Mark Twain). It is essential for the author (as it is for any decent creator) that his or her creatures stay in line and do not transgress the boundaries of the story universe, or of the parts they have been assigned in the play; in particular, the characters should preferably stick to their authorized roles.

However, characters do not always "behave." Authors frequently complain that their personae assume independent lives and voices, and that the plot starts to develop by an inner logic of its own, with the author as a bemused spectator on the sidelines, following the antics of his or her creatures and chronicling them as best he or she can. In extreme cases, the characters may confront the author with their demands and enter onto the stage by themselves, as real, live persons, as has been immortalized in the famous play by Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921).

My use of the "stage image" above is more than a facile illustration: it serves to highlight some of the points that I have been trying to make with regard to the process of narration. A stage play basically consists of characters speaking in the *voices* that have been assigned them by the playwright. These voices are used in the context of an actual setting, that is, a context created by the physical stage, by the director's interpretation of the text, but most of all by the wider ambiance of the literary playhouse and its temporary inhabitants, the audience, the latter representing the broader context of society.

The process by which (theatrical or literary) voices are created is called **voicing**. The voices appearing on the scene are embodied in the *dramatis personae*, originally "personified" (as the word indicates: *persona* is Latin for "mask") by the masks worn in the classical theatrical performance. Voices are made possible within the *universe of discourse*, that is, they neither represent independently created roles, to be played at will as exponents of the actor's self-expression, nor are they strictly grammatically produced and semantically defined units, to be interpreted by linguists and text analysts according to the rules of grammar or narration. Rather, voices have to be understood in an interactive process of ongoing collaboration between all the parties involved. It is this **contextual cooperation** that the process of "voicing," in the final analysis, presupposes and represents.

Successful voicing depends on the interplay of the agents in the narrative process, narrator and "narratee" in concert making up the successful narration. In the following, I will illustrate the crucial role of "voice" (understood as the verbal expression of a particular character's role) in a pragmatic approach to text. I will do this by sketching out the interplay of the various voices in Nélida Piñon's *The Republic of Dreams*; in particular, I will show how Breta, the granddaughter, is given a different voice, depending on her position in the narrative.<sup>3</sup>

First of all, we have the *author*, Nélida Piñon, who is responsible for the literary work as such. She speaks to us indirectly, as it were, as a *narrator*, through the device of storytelling. As the "narrative instance" in charge, she has all the attributes that we

ordinarily associate with a storyteller: omnipotence, omniscience (specifically, knowledge of what goes on in the heads and “inner sancta” of the persons described), omnipresence, and so on. In this narrative, as is usual, the narrator remains *implicit* (see Mey 1999: section 8.4.2): we are told that “Eulália had started to die on Tuesday” (the opening sentence of the book; Piñon 1984: 3), but no official, *explicit* “sender” of this message is provided. The *voice* we are hearing is the voice of the narrator, not that of the author: the latter only speaks to us *through* the former.

Similarly, we are introduced to Breta as Eulália’s granddaughter by the same implicit narrative voice:

Eulália watched them [the grandchildren coming into her room to say goodbye]. . . . Eulália noted Breta’s presence. . . . She had always handed over this granddaughter to her husband. (1984: 14)

Later on in the book, some of the *characters* tend to become narrators in their own rights. This starts already a couple of pages down from the previous quote, where the grandfather introduces himself as a narrator by saying:

The story of Breta, and of this family, began at my birth. (1984: 16)

As to Breta herself, she assumes her role as an homodiegetic (“I”) narrator with the words:

When I was a little girl, Grandfather surprised me with presents and unexpected proposals. (1984: 66)

These continuous shifts between third person and first person narration are characteristic of this particular novel; but in order to pin down the “I-voice” of a particular piece of first person narrative, we have not only to invoke the grammatical or linguistic resources at our command, but in addition, we have to enter the “fictional world” (Mey 1994), the world of narration, by identifying with the particular voice that is speaking. For instance, in the case of Madruga, the grandfather, introducing himself as an “I” on p. 16, we are at first uncertain whom the narrative voice belongs to: Eulália (who also has been present throughout the preceding section), or Madruga, her husband. As we read on, it turns out that the voice is that of a boy: his passion for fishing, his burgeoning attraction to women, all bespeak the gender of the young Madruga.

When, towards the end of the book, after many allusions to her future role as a family chronicler (e.g. on p. 17, where her grandfather muses: “What if she were to be the first writer in the family?”), Breta “comes out” as an author (“I will write the book nonetheless,” p. 662), it is the voice of Breta, as a *character turned narrator*, telling us this. And when we close the book, on the last sentence:

I only know that tomorrow I will start to write the story of Madruga. (1984: 663)

we are in the presence of a narrative voice that tells us that what the Breta character is going to do as an *author* is to write the story, parts of which she has just told us in her own, *character-become-narrator’s* voice. By this narratorial trick, Breta the *presumptive*

author hands back the narrative relay to the *actual* author who has created her, Nélida Piñon, thus closing the narrative score on a final, impressive flourish.

## 4 Conclusion

It is only through an active cooperative effort, shared between reader and author, that the interplay of voices can be successfully created and recreated. Reading is a *cooperative* act; the pragmatics of literary texts spell out the conditions for this collaborative effort, without which the text would not properly exist as text. Only through a *pragmatic act* of reading can the text be realized; without such an act, and its corresponding actor, the *reader*, the “letters of literature” will forever be dead.<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Both readings, “his own” and “being his own”, are possible. Thanks to Deborah Tannen for pointing this out.
- 2 The Russian text contains more clues in this respect than does the English translation I have quoted (despite the fact that the translator is a native-born Russian). A recent English translation of Bulgakov’s work fares slightly better: “as was learned subsequently” is how Burgin and O’Connor render the discussed passage (1995: 6). Even so, the tense problem remains.
- 3 In the following, the translations are my own; the page references are to the original, Brazilian edition of the novel.
- 4 On “pragmatic acts”, see Mey (2000: ch. 8).

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