

Religious Fervor and the Cognitive Linguistics of the Small-Clause

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My field of interest is the linguistic structure of the attributive clause from a cognitive point of view, with a special interest in the so-called small-clause. With this term linguists refer to the complement of a mental activity verb that, if it is verbal, uses a nonfinite form of the verb without the infinitive marker “to” or, alternatively, a progressive tense. In contrast to other types of complements of mental activity verbs, such as the that-clause, the how-clause and the to-infinitive clause, this linguistic form is non-epistemic in that it makes no reference to a truth judgment by either the narrator or the experiencer. In other words, it allows for the expression of experience without any intellectual mediation, “raw” as it were.

The small-clause, therefore, is a gold-mine for the depiction of various forms of limited, disturbed or altered consciousness—when intellectual mediation is underdeveloped, degenerated or temporarily dysfunctional—such as those connected with mental retardation, mental illness, epilepsy, situations of extreme mental stress and dreamlike, hypnotic, hallucinatory and exalted states.

My contribution will start with discussion of the different cognitive aspects of the small clause and their literary possibilities. I will then focus on a number of passages in the work of Flannery O’Connor and other writers, so as to show the different ways in which the small-clause is used to depict a character in the throes of a religious experience.