

Abhorrence and attraction

A stylistic analysis of distancing and identification techniques in literature

This paper presents a stylistic analysis of the way subjective world views are expressed in a corpus of Dutch literary novels. My focus is on the grammatical features tense & aspect, complement constructions and verb use, and the way these features are used stylistically, to express the subjective 'mind style' of characters and/or narrators. These features have also proven to be important in establishing an effect of closeness or distance in literary texts (Leech & Short 2007): an author can manipulate the reader to experience cognitive and emotional identification with a protagonist (Van Peer and Pander Maat 1996), or he can make readers feel distanced from characters and events (Vandelanotte 2010, Dancygier 2005).

The texts in my corpus show a marked difference in the way subjectivity is expressed. Whereas some texts show a preference for first person complement constructions like (1), other texts prefer more objective-looking, distant and generic phrasings like (2) or (5), while again other texts vary between definitive statements (4) and suppositions full of modality and hedging (3):

1. I think he must be ill.
2. He appears to be ill.
3. If you ask me, he might be suffering from a small illness of some sort.
4. He is ill.
5. The whole world is suffering from illness.

I will show that the different texts in my corpus each show a preference for one of these types of sentences. These preferences can be brought to the surface by a quantitative analysis, i.e. by counting occurrences of specific stylistic features (e.g. different types of complement constructions, different types of main and subordinate clauses, and the ratio of static vs. dynamic event structures).

The quantitative differences found also have a qualitative effect: the specific stylistic manipulation of distancing and identification techniques in a particular text contributes to the expression of the central theme or message of the novel. The close relation between stylistic presentation and textual interpretation is especially clear in one of the texts in my corpus: *The Asylum Seeker* by the Dutch novelist Arnon Grunberg, which has an antihero as its main character. An antihero is an interesting character: how is the reader able to feel empathy for a person whose actions and thoughts are far from benevolent (cf. Fagel 2009)? The goal of the author is to both attract the reader to enter the mind of the antihero and to share his subjective world view, and at the same time to make him abhor this unpleasant character. I will show how the markedly static event structures in this novel create an effect of distancing and closeness at the same time, an effect which is different from the way subjectivity is expressed in other texts.

In combining quantitative and a qualitative research methods, my paper also addresses the question how quantitative data can be used to underpin a qualitative interpretation; in view of the results, I will briefly reflect on the problematic nature of attempts to explain the workings of the creative mind using quantitative data.

References:

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