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Occasional Papers
No. 1

**A Critical Approach to
Linguistic Categories
and 'Literary' Discourse:
Iris Murdoch's *The Book and
the Brotherhood***

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**PALA: The Poetics and
Linguistics Association**
1988

A Critical Approach to Linguistic Categories and 'Literary' Discourse: Iris Murdoch's *The Book and the Brotherhood*

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It is not especially difficult to draw general conclusions on methodological approaches right at the end of the twentieth century. What can be a bit complex is to revise concepts and try to apply them, taking into account the large amount of information available. Aware of the risk of failure I would like to start by stating the feasibility of the application of linguistic categories to discourse analysis; the complementary concepts **text/discourse** are central to this purpose. Edmondson 1981 gives a concise definition:

A **text** is a structural sequence of linguistic expression forming a unitary whole, and a **discourse** a structured event manifest in linguistic (and other) behaviour.

Consequently, the attempt to recognize linguistic structures is textual, and this can be relevant to the analysis of discourse, serving to illustrate other types of behaviour.

Literary criticism has been using the term 'point of view' for years and this has been widely discussed (Booth 1961, Fowler 1977, Fowler 1986); my proposal is to consider the linguistic level of this term, which in itself turns out to be metaphorical. The reading of *The Book and the Brotherhood* offers different points of interest for the discussion of these ideas. The following passage is a good illustration:

'Who's the lad in black satin over there?' asked Lily, who seemed in no hurry for the metamorphosis. 'She must be crazy to skate in that long skirt.'

'That's no lady, that's the parson!' said Gerard in whom the cold and the light and the prospect of speed had inspired an unusual jollity.

'That's our local vicar,' said Rose. 'Angus McAlister, or Father McAlister as he likes to be called. He's fairly new here. He always wears his cassock! Remember last year Gerard?'

(Murdoch, pp. 253-54)

Lily expresses the wrong point of view and Gerard corrects her; Rose adds some specific information, in linguistic

terms the direct speech question gets a direct speech answer with a pronominal *that* expressing the same referent, inaccurately translated by Lily from reality (long black skirts: old lady = cassock: clergyman). Gerard's response is clarified by Rose by using an appositive reformulation of naming relation (our parson/our local vicar, or Father McAlister...). The literary point of view has a linguistic counterpart in the consideration of **deixis**. In this particular case this concept operates at the level of reference, with determiners to indicate proximity and the shared knowledge about something, specially in situational reference and indicating larger situation (Quirk et al 1985, p. 266). Deixis also appears at the level of the notional category **time** in the linguistic categories of **tense** and **aspect**. The predicators '*is*' and '*likes to be called*' express habitual aspect, an event simultaneous to each speech reference (Comoro 1985, pp. 36, 143); the use of these verbal forms also indicates the mood of the speakers, their attitudes. This short passage shows the point of view of characters and their way of looking at reality, which makes up the narrative text of fiction (Halliday 1971; Leech & Short 1981, pp. 31-36).

Similarly, though in a more complex manner, a whole narrative text of fiction, a novel, contains a point of view, an articulation of intentions; this is usually verbalized by different linguistic elements. In this novel by Iris Murdoch one of the main topics is *the book*, around which the brotherhood gathers. Everything depending upon the book, there must be a method to unravel its relevance. Linguistic categories such as **modality** (mood, modality, modulation) and **deixis** (tense, aspect, reference) help to look at a text in perspective. This perspective determines the understanding of the text as discourse.

When *the book* is mentioned for the first time there is no clear reference:

'Have you decided anything about the book?'
She was not referring to any book written by Gerard,
there was as yet no such thing, but to another book..
(Murdoch, p. 10)

The reference in direct speech can be misleading; that is why the narrator explains and we get a linguistic perspective from that comment.

Later on there is another question about the book. Again, a narratorial comment explains the vagueness: 'This book was Levquist's interminable book on Sophocles' (p. 20). The repeated use of *the book* requires the narratorial comments involving 'temporary departure from the general train of thought' (L.B. Jones 1983, pp. 76-77). These remarks are no longer necessary once the perspective is firmly established; this is enhanced with long narratorial texts in reported speech. The perspective is altered by means of retrospection, and the

narrative tense comes to mean 'past in the past', adding a new chronological deixis:

When they were all still young...
(Murdoch., p. 97)

Given this, the understanding of other references is easily achieved:

About this time, during the exciting political arguments, Crimond spoke of a long quasi-philosophical book which he intended to write, and whose agenda he sometimes, at their insistence, enlarged upon to Gerard and the company.

(p. 98)

These two types of reference, the cataphoric of the book (pp. 10, 30) and the anaphoric in time past, previous to the current narrative tense, *a long quasi-philosophical book*, plus the reference to another book by a different author (p. 20), make up the referential frame alluded to in the title of the novel, *The Book and the Brotherhood*. The references of determiners are contextually understood and narratorial comments avoid vagueness. The narrator contributes to a better understanding of the topic:

*The typing was always of hastily written political stuff not of **the book** of whose existence of course she knew, but which she had never seen.*

(p. 149)

The italics indicate the existence of shared knowledge. So, whenever the narrator or a character refers to *the book*, the reference is understood, as happens in the dialogue between David Crimond and Jean Cambus, *the book, a book* (p. 113), or the argument between Rose, Jenkin and Gerard (pp. 220-26). The same occurs in the conversation between David Crimond and Gerard, *the book, the same book, my book, your book, a very important book*, (pp. 288-300).

Up to now evidence has been given from a linguistic perspective -- that of reference and tense. There is another linguistic category related to the notion of **deixis**: namely, **aspect**. This is the linguistic category expressing 'the different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation' (Comrie 1976, p. 5). Aspect is usually thought of in connection with the verb; there is, however, another possibility of application which is relevant to this analysis. A. Martinet (1950) wrote that the verbal categories of aspect can also be nominal in series such as *seed, germinated grain, wheat in grass, wheat in grain, ripened wheat*. There is a consideration pertaining to aspect in a such noun. This implies the application of the notional

category **time** to nouns. Thus, the relationship between time and *the book* can also be translated into terms relevant to aspect.

Most references to *the book* by the characters (pp. 10, 39, 98-100, 113, 220-24, 288-300) and by the narrator (p. 10, 149) have an ingressive meaning, i.e. an inchoative aspect, since its mention marks the intention of a beginning, a new situation. And this happens continuously till the end of the novel, when *the book* occupies the pages again:

His [Gerard's] acquaintance at the Oxford Press had said that he would soon, he hoped, be able to lay hands on a proof of Crimond's book, and would send it to Gerard at once by special messenger. Gerard dreaded the arrival of the thing. He did not want to read Crimond's hateful book, he would rather want to tear it up, but he was *condemned* to it, he would have to read it. If it was bad he would feel a sickening degrading satisfaction, if it was good he would feel hatred.

(p. 496)

The different references to *the book* mark an aspect of 'telic duration' (Comrie 1976, p. 41 ff.) since there is a progress of something definite. The narratorial comment reports the action with the same aspect:

Gerard took the parcel , it was heavy and bulky.

(p. 499)

The boy had brought *that book*.

(p. 501)

The functional text perspective, the point of view, is also realized by the concept of modality, the mode of presentation, which includes the report of the action and also omissions:

They were silent for a moment. When they talked of Crimond they never mentioned *the book*..

(p. 521)

This comment reveals the pragmatic level of **absence**, which a dialogic text might render in dots. Now the *book* is something finished, since it has been published and printed (p. 558), and it is **perfective**. This implies the passage of **process** (a dynamic situation viewed imperfectively) to **event** (a dynamic situation viewed perfectly).

The book is apparently the same throughout the whole novel though its discourse shows that it is not so. Besides, the pragmatic effects derived from narratorial comments build up an

understanding exceeding the textual level, the linguistic basis.

The linguistic category of aspect is also supplemented by tense; Rose asks Gerard :

'Will you review it?'
(p.558)

There is future tense implying personal volition. Still, it might be related to the use of a 'prospective' aspect. *The book* goes on as an **event** and the category of aspect shows the evolution of its discourse, **process** (non-perfective = ingressive, telic curative) -- **event** (perfective -- prospective). Consequently, the discourse is completed. The functional text perspective results from the information given by both the narrator and the characters.

The trouble with this type of discussion is the overabundance of items; there are books and books. Rose says:

I'll help you with your book.
(p. 568)

and Gerard in direct thought:

And he said to himself, of course I *will* write that book, I was pretending something to myself when I imagined that I wouldn't, I was sick then, I've *got* to write it.

(p. 582)

This is the beginning of a new **process**, Gerard's book and the use of another ingressive meaning:

Yes, I'll attempt the book.
(p. 584)

The recurrence of the process also affects David Crimond; this shows in the dialogue between him and Lily Bone:

'So, it's finished', said Lily.
'Yes.'
'So, what are you writing now?'
'Another book.'

(p. 589)

There is a new dynamic process on, and the noun phrase *the book* conveys the ingressive meaning again.

A new narrative level is introduced by the narrator, in the form of Gerard's dream:

He fell asleep and dreamt that he was standing on that mountainside holding an open book upon whose pages was written '*Dominus Illuminatio Mea*' and from far above an angel was descending in the form of a great grey parrot with loving clever eyes and the parrot perched upon the book and spread cut its grey and scarlet wings and the parrot was the book.

(p. 585)

Leaving aside imaginative associations with another **book** this passage of the dream includes the ambiguous, not vague, reference to a book which may be the **event** by David Crimond or the process by Gerard; in any case, the noun phrase *an open book* represents an abstraction indicating a logical and psychological degree of ambiguity (Empson 1930, 2nd. edn.).

This leads us to a final consideration: the deixis of **time** (linguistic categories of tense and aspect) is the only sign of identity given to us. There is no title assigned to the *book*, just a contextual identification. By assigning no title to the *book*, no proper name, there is no possibility of alienating it, of creating a metaphor out of itself, as J. Hillis Miller might have pointed out (1971). The analysis of salient signs also requires the consideration of absent elements, specially when absence is relevant to the understanding of the discourse.

The whole discourse comes out of the interaction between the text and the reader, what we get after reading the text at the linguistic level of discourse. Moreover, the idea of point of view is textually supported by the use of **deixis** and **modality**. The perspective supplied by these concepts and their linguistic categories develops different discourse functions, as Susan Ehrlich (1987) states.

The recognition, classification and description of elements in a text is the preliminary step in a linguistic critical analysis, with explication being the second. The third stage, evaluation, may belong to literary criticism, but the first two phases, characteristic of linguistic criticism, are essential to reach the third (Bronzwaer 1970).

The critical linguistic analysis of a text and the recognition of its pragmatic possibilities reveal the relevant features ascribed to a highly conscious discourse, especially whenever this discourse involves intellectual and aesthetic values. In literature, the passage from **text** to **discourse** is completed after reading, but never finishes.

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Literary reading has been a topic of inquiry among scholars of literature and educationalists for nearly three quarters of a century (Richards, 1929; Rosenblatt, 1937). Among empirical researchers, in contrast, attention to literature is quite recent, with most studies having been carried out only over the last 20 years. This is considered further in the studies described later, but the limitations of this approach to literary discourse are also suggested preparatory to outlining a range of other approaches to literary reading. The predominant questions of this chapter are: What is literary discourse? Does it result in a type of reading different from that studied in mainstream discourse processing research?