When sentences are not sentences: evidence against poetic grammar

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1   Introduction

In this paper I examine deviant sentences from literary texts which cannot be generated by the grammar. I show how these sentences are processed pragmatically, and argue that these pragmatic processes account for the interpretation of deviant sentences in a way that theories of poetic grammar cannot.

Theories of poetic grammar account for the kinds of linguistic deviation we find in literary texts, positing 'poetic grammar' as a variation on the natural language grammar which produces these regular deviations linguistically. The broad justification for poetic grammar is that the deviations found in literature are interpreted consistently by readers, like normal sentences; since evidence of this kind of consistent interpretation is a major empirical commitment for linguistics, it seems that the literary deviations may require a linguistic explanation. For example, when we read Shelley's line, "*Happier they their happiness who knew*", we aware that the sentence is ungrammatical by normal standards, but since it is interpreted consistently and without difficulty, one may assume there must be some linguistic system which accounts for the interpretation: a poetic grammar.

There has been a great deal of theoretical discussion of this issue over the years (Kiparsky 1972; Ching, Haley & Lunsford 1980; Austin 1984; Culler 1987; Fabb 2004), but here I would like to engage with the debate by considering data from experimental literature, specifically Samuel Beckett's late novella *Worstward Ho*. It is well known that experimental literature tests conventional assumptions and theories of literature, so we may expect that work of this kind could provide a similar test for theories of literary language. Indeed I believe that the evidence presented in this paper offers a challenge to the assumptions that underpin poetic grammar theories within Cognitive Linguistics work, and constitutes an affirmation of the explanatory power of a modularized generativist approach.

2   The analysis of deviation

As the evidence for poetic grammar is consistent interpretation of deviant sentences, the methodology for gathering relevant data is fairly simple: read through the texts and identify examples of ungrammatical but interpretable sentences. Now I should emphasise that this does not mean we must analyse every example of unusual language use; to see this, consider the following paragraph from the first page:

(1)   Say a body. Where none. No mind. Where none. That at least. A place. Where none. For the body. To be in. Move in. Out of. Back into. No. No out. No back. Only in. Stay in. On in. Still. [7.3][1]

This paragraph is representative of the style of the novella. Many of the orthographic sentences here are incomplete or difficult to interpret: *where none* and *that at least* are heavily elided fragments of sentences, and the proliferation of such fragments can make the text difficult to read. Yet these fragments are not ill-formed in themselves – one can imagine an everyday context in which such utterances would be perfecly normal – and in the context of the paragraph the meaning of the fragments can be understood without too much difficulty.

However not all of the text is well-formed, as we can see with the unusual sentence *A place [...] For the body. To be in. Move in. Out of.* The strangeness of this example can be explained once we try to analyse the ellipsis and gapping relations between the constituents. The punctuation and subsequent prosody indicate that *to be in* and *move in* are in simple apposition, placed one after another, but in fact it is *be in* and *move in* that are syntactically coordinated, yielding the interpretation *to be in, to move in*; *out of* then adjoins to the phrase *move in*, coindexing with *move* for its elided verb (*move out of*).

However this is not acceptable, as the coordination of the VPs would require the transitive preposition *into* rather than *in* as the complement of the first *move* (giving *move into, out of*); as a result, the VPs do not match. Therefore it does not seem that there is a principled ellipsis explanation for the interpretation of the gaps and missing constituents in this example into a grammatical sentence. The interpretation seems clear (*for the body to be in, move in, move out of*) but this meaning is not provided by the syntax.

The detailed analysis of this deviant sentence serves to demonstrate an important point: that there may be no plausible syntactic structure for the text, even when meaning and contextual information seems to indicate that a text should be interpreted as a sentence. Examples like this seem in some way deviant, but nevertheless they receive interpretations, and it is such examples that we should be interested in when investigating poetic grammar.

3   Examples of deviation

In *Worstward Ho* there are a few similar examples of deviation that recur, and these can be sorted into groups based on the syntactic problems observed. The example just discussed is one of apparently malfunctioning ellipsis, and there are a number of similar examples throughout the text:

(2)   No knowing how know only no __ out of. __ Into only. [11.3]

(3)   It stands. What? Yes. Say it stands. Had to _ up in the end and stand. [8.2]

(4)   Say yes that the bones may _ pain till no choice but stand. Somehow _ up and stand. [8.2-9.)

(5)   Where then but there see now another. Bit by bit _ an old man and child. [13.6]

(2) has a similar explanation to the example just discussed, where the filling of the gaps is unclear; given the syntactic context it seems clear that these gaps should coindex with an appropriate noun, but there is no viable candidate in the text and the interpretation is only constructed by appealing to contextual information and the residual structure, filling it with a noun like *way* (*no way out of*). The interesting thing is that, despite the fact that the text is heavily fragmented and difficult to interpret, it seems that no other interpretation is possible other than that which involves filling the gaps with a noun such as *way*. Detailed analysis of this kind shows that a similar explanation obtains for examples (3)-(5) as well.

There are many other kinds of examples from the text, such as apparently ill-formed questions, deviant coordinate structures and other common constructions (see Thoms 2007 ch.4). However, the most interesting of all are the examples of movement, specifically those of apparent passivisation. We see this demonstrated in the following, some of which are repeated throughout the text:

(6)   Say on. Be said on. [7.1]

(7)   Say for be said. [7.2]

(8)   Said for missaid. For be missaid. [37.1]

(9)   See for be seen. [13.2]

(10)   Bow it down. Be it bowed. [21.2]

(11)   Be they so said. [27.2]

4

Most of these examples appear to be in passive imperative forms, as in *Be warned.* Passive imperative are infrequent constructions: imperatives typically elide agentive subjects, such as the hitter in *Hit him*, but the imperatives of passives elide the moved patient object, such as the person who is struck in *Be hit by him.* Syntactically this is well-formed, and the meaning is clear, but it is still odd considering it is a command to be the patient of some given action.

The verb *say* follows a similar pattern to *hit*: *John says it* and *It was said by John*, become *Say it* and *Be said by John*. However, the crucial difference is that patient role is recoverable in the passive as the null pronominal subject with *Hit*, but not with *Say*; this is because the null pronominal subject in an imperative can only be second person or first person plural (*you* or *we*), but the patient pronominal patient of verbs like *Say* (that which is shifted into subject roles in passivisation) can only be third person impersonal, as in *I say it*; thus **I say he*, **I say you*, or even **I say we* are impossible. *Be said* is an un-generable imperative because of the selectional restrictions of the verb *say*.

All of examples (6)-(11) seem to have been transformed into the passive in this manner, and the problems of agency and selectional restrictions seem to explain why these utterances are difficult, if not impossible, to interpret. Of all these examples, only (9) seems to work; this is because *see* does not encounter the same agency restrictions as *say*; rather, *see* behaves like *hit* in taking any kind of patient pronoun.

The analysis of these examples has important implications for the theory of literary language. Like the malfunctioning ellipsis examples, these 'false passives' also exhibit relatively consistent interpretation, despite their deviant forms – they demand interpretation as passives, and no other parse seems plausible. For example, *Be said on* could be paraphrased as something like *Let it be said continuously*, and the general meaning of allowing or forcing something to be said by some unknown agent is fairly uncontroversial. Stylistically this is in keeping with Beckett's work, in which the agency of actors is continually concealed (cf Trezise 1990), but this is not a requirement for the interpretation of

the deviant sentence.

What makes these examples especially important for the study of literary language is that their syntax is not only deviant, but impossible: *Be said on* is not a possible form in English under any theoretical explanation. Passive transformations of the kind in (6) aren't just non-standard forms with well-formed equivalents, but they cannot be generated at all for fundamental reasons relating to both meaning and structure. The fact that such impossible sentences still receive interpretation, and that they are in any way parsed or understood to be 'sentences', requires an explanation, but it should be obvious that any such explanation cannot be linguistic. These forms cannot be explained by poetic grammar.

4   Pragmatic explanation: relevance theory

The means by which these texts are interpreted must be pragmatic, and such pragmatic processes must explain how we can arrive at a consistent propositional interpretation from fragmentary, non-propositional linguistic structures. Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson 1995) places great importance upon modularization, so one may expect that it would not have a problem with explaining these interpretative processes without relying upon grammatical processes. Here I would like to briefly explain how a relevance-theoretic approach can account for such interpretations without appealing to computations specific to literary language.

One of the most important claims of Relevance Theory is that logial form – that is, the syntactic and semantic form delivered by the grammar – is radically underdetermined, and that propositional meaning is always produced contextually, by enrichment processes that obey a general principle of relevance. One immediate product of this approach is that a great deal of utterance meaning is contextually determined, and therefore that consistent interpretations, like the kind seen in the examples from *Worstward Ho*, may be produced by general

pragmatic interpretation as well as fully specified syntactic structures. In this case the consistent interpretations are not produced by specific computations of a poetic grammar, but general operations of pragmatic inference which resemble grammatical processes.

There is a history of the study of pragmatic modes of interpretation which seem like syntactic ones, most notably in Grice's (1975) analysis of conventional implicatures. Grice defined conventional implicatures as non-truth conditional implicatures derived from the meaning of some specific words; that is, inferences which are not fully specified by truth-conditional semantics, but which are still produced by the conceptual semantic meaning of certain operators. The classic example of this is with conjunction: in the sentence *John isn't here, so Joe isn't coming*, the conjunction *so* seems to indicate a relationship of causality between the two clauses, and Grice argued that this is part of the semantic meaning of *so*. This is not part of the truth-conditional semantic meaning of the sentence, so the meaning of causality must be delivered by inference.

However conventional implicatures have presented a problem for many theorists, since they seem to straddle the distinction between what is said (explicit linguistic communication) and what is implicated (contextually derived inference). Furthermore, relevance theorists (in particular Diane Blakemore) have shown that the conventional implicature relations cannot be summarised as conceptual aspects of semantic meaning, and that doing so impoverishes the subtlety of interpretation.

In rejecting this account of conventional implicatures, Blakemore (1987) has shown that the contribution of the conjunctions are better understood as 'semantic constraints on relevance', providing information for the procedure of subsequent interpretation without specifying it fully. This aspect of meaning is described as 'procedural semantic information'. Generally, procedural semantic information may be understood as encoding blueprints for utterance interpretation, steering the pragmatic enrichment of the sentence without tying it to truth-conditions.

Recent work on procedural semantic information has indicated that it may adequately describe a number of interpretive processes, involving discourse markers and other functional items like pronouns (Nicolle 1998; Blakemore 2002; Ahern & Leonetti 2004). I have argued elsewhere (Thoms 2007) that these explanations may account for the kind of consistent interpretations seen in the examples from Beckett's text: in the examples of false passives, the passive morphology of *be + past participle* encodes procedural semantic information which indicates a passive interpretation.

Thus in the interpretation of *be said*, the verb *to say* communicates the conceptual information, and the passive morphology communicates the procedural instructions for the manipulation of the conceptual representation. The important thing here is that procedural semantic information is not the same as the semantic relations that encode agency in the syntax, but rather a post-syntactic component of semantic information which interacts with pragmatic processes. This is why the construction still appears to communicate a meaning of passivity, even though the syntax fails. Procedural semantic relations can thus account for the apparently structural meaning relations we see in deviant sentences, and can do so without rejecting the empirical evidence for their syntactic deviation.

5   Conclusion

To conclude this paper, I would like to show why the kind of evidence just discussed must be considered as evidence against poetic grammar. As mentioned above, the broad justification for the theory of poetic grammar is that a great deal of deviant sentences in literature exhibit consistent interpretation. Different frameworks treat such data in different ways, depending on theoretical commitments.

In Cognitive Linguistics, grammatical structures are ultimately derived from meaning relations, and the meaning relations which constitute this system are not restricted to lexical semantic meaning, but also including temporal and

iconic aspects of sentence production within the grammar (Croft 2004). This means that 'consistent interpretation' should be evidence for grammatical structures, and thus a Cognitive Linguistics approach could provide an account for Shelley's line, "*Happier they their happiness who knew*': the noncanonical location of the constituent *who knew* might be explained by a grammatical generalization which describes 'iconic' syntactic forms of this type. This structural relation is taken to be grammatical, as part of the poetic grammar. This would be an empirical advantage for the theory, since it captures what seems to be a linguistic regularity.

However, we can see that the evidence from Beckett's texts could not be described in the same way. Now it should be clear that these examples are essentially continuous with examples of ellipsis and indeed the unusual movement in Shelley's line, since there is no idenfitiable linguistic property which distinguishes between them. Indeed the only thing that unifies these examples is that they are all ungrammatical, by any English speaker's standards. This is a major problem for a theory of poetic grammar: one cannot distinguish between what kinds of deviation can and cannot be admitted to the poetic grammar, since the theory does not constrain the grammar in such a way. This is a major empirical problem, one that undercuts the entire theory, since it means that we cannot distinguish between well-formed and ill-formed sentences at all, and this is the goal of any theory of grammar.

In contrast, a generativist perspective, allied with a Relevance Theory approach to utterance interpretation, does not suffer such empirical problems, since it distinguishes finely between well-formed and ill-formed sentences, while still providing an explanation of the consistent interpretations of unusual sentences. Any theory of literature should be capable of handling the extremes of experimental literature, and I believe the evidence in this paper shows that a generativist approach can account for literary language in a way that poetic grammar cannot.

Notes

[1]The square-bracketed numbers at the end indicate page no. and paragraph no. of source in Beckett (2003).

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