

## Information Design in *Ackroyd*

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### 0. Introduction

*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is a well-known and most controversial detective story for its unprecedented trick. It is narrated by Dr. James Sheppard, who becomes Poirot's assistant to investigate a murder case. The story begins with the death of Mrs. Ferrars, a wealthy widow who is rumored to be intimate with Roger Ackroyd, a country gentleman, and to have poisoned her husband. On that night Ackroyd is found murdered in his study. At the end, it is revealed that it was Sheppard who drove her to death by blackmailing, and murdered Ackroyd to cover it up.

The narrator in detective stories is privileged to choose what to tell and how to tell, making use of various techniques in order to distract and mislead readers without being unfair.

In this paper we would like to examine the intricate narrative style used by the narrator-murderer from three different aspects — modal expressions, adverbs and disnarration—and to explicate the skillful information design of this work.

### 1. Modal expressions

#### 1.1 Small-corpus-based approach

First we would like to see the overall information design of the story from modal expressions, defined by Simpson (1993: 47) as a speaker's attitude towards, or opinion about, the truth of a proposition expressed by a sentence. We take up two broad patterns, deontic and epistemic. The deontic system represents obligation, duty, commitment, and desire. The epistemic represents knowledge, belief, cognition and perception.

Here we would like to use the model proposed by Simpson (1990, 1993). He discusses how first-person narratives have positive shading with deontic modal expressions, negative shading with epistemic expressions, and neutral shading with categorical assertions.

Building a small corpus of the story and processing it with the *WordSmith Tools* (version 5), we extracted the modal expressions in the narrative.

#### 1.2 Combined dispersion map

The combined dispersion map of both epistemic and deontic expressions is shown in Figure 1, which displays where the search words occur in the story of 27 chapters as a percentage.

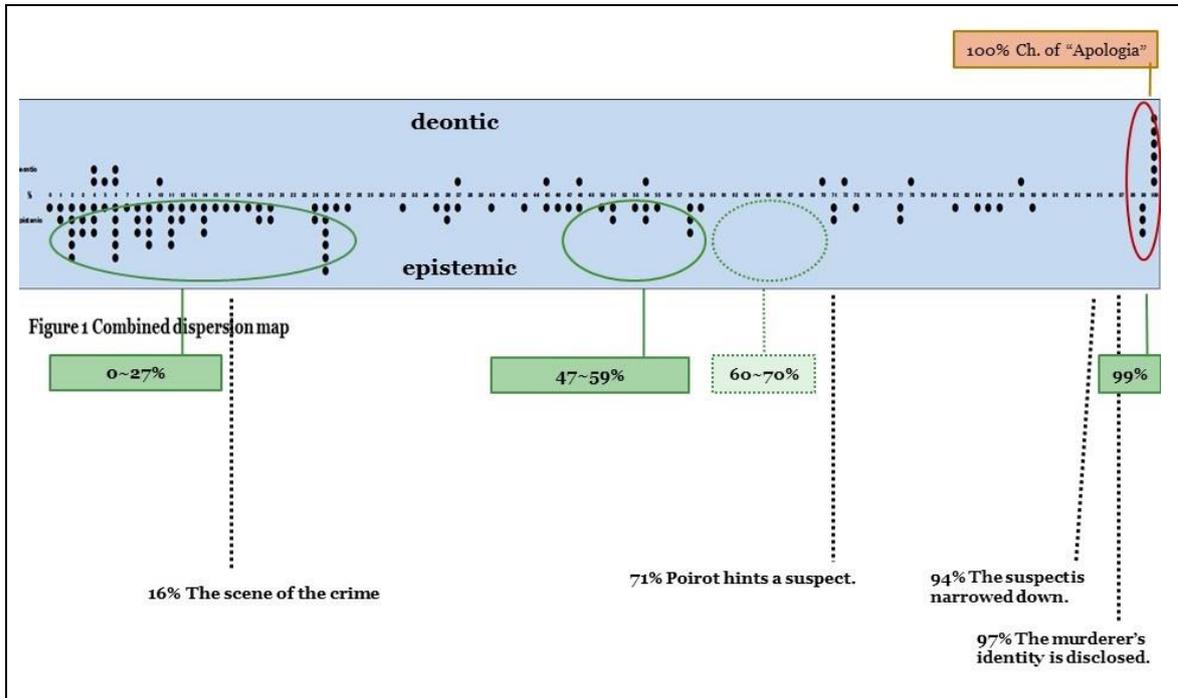


Fig. 1 Combined dispersion map

From Figure 1, deontic expressions are distributed in the rather flat low frequency, except the end of the story. The epistemic ones are distributed with higher frequency throughout the story, from which we could assume that this story is narrated through distancing effect of negative shading.

The epistemic expressions are concentrated mainly from the beginning to 27% in the circle on the left. It seems natural that the earlier part of the story is narrated in negative shading for the sake of suspense. From 47% to 59%, there are several points emphasizing uncertainty or lack of confidence shown in concordance lines. There is no epistemic expression between 60% and 70%, where Poirot proceeds with his investigation of the people involved. From 99% to 100% in the circle on the right, there is an abrupt transition from epistemic to deontic.

Incidentally, at 71% of the story, Poirot hints a suspect, at 94% the suspect is narrowed down, and at 97% the identity of the murderer, Dr. Sheppard, is disclosed.

### 1.3 Switching of shadings

There are two examples of effective shading switching.

In the middle of the condensed epistemic expressions in the circle, at 16%, we find a part of neutral shading with no narratorial modality as ‘The letter had been brought

in at twenty minutes to nine. It was just on ten minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread'. The narrator withholds subjective expressions and tells the story using categorical assertions alone. As a matter of fact, between the two sentences, the murder of Ackroyd is carried out. What is stated here is nothing but truth, but this sequence can create a stylistic effect to distract readers, a point to which we will come back later.

The other one is seen in the map from 99% with negative shading to 100% with positive one. In the earlier part of the last chapter, 'Apologia', the narrator looks back the crime with epistemic. At 100%, the narrator-murderer tells the story in positive shading with deontic, ending with 'I wish Hercule Poirot had never retired from work and come here to grow vegetable marrows'.

#### 1.4 Information design

Modal expressions can be seen as the criterion of narrative style. This story has a style which is rather less co-operatively orientated towards readers: with the positive shading part seen in the very end, and negative shading parts of high frequency in the first quarter of the story. The crime scene is narrated in a flat style without any modal expressions at 16%. Then till around 60% the narrator describes his doubtfulness or uncertainty in epistemic expressions, followed by some parts without them. The radical transition from epistemic to deontic at 100% puts an end to the prolonged suspense of the story dramatically and effectively. The narrator expresses his true feelings in a co-operative style.

We can see Christie's skillful information design in manipulating modal expressions while observing fairness towards readers.

## 2. Adverbs

### 2.1 Subject-oriented adverb and manner adverb

It is well known that the same adverb can often be used both to describe the inner state of the subject performing the action, and the way the action is performed. We will call the former a subject-oriented adverb, and the latter a manner adverb.

- (1) a. He looked at his watch anxiously.  
b. He was anxious when he looked at his watch.  
c. He looked at his watch in an anxious manner (way).
- (2) a. I looked at my watch anxiously.  
b. ? I looked my watch in an anxious manner.  
c. I looked at him anxiously to hurry him up.

*Anxiously* in (1a) can be interpreted both as subject-oriented, paraphrased as (1b), and as manner, paraphrased as (1c). The adverb occurring with the first-person subject like (2a) is more often interpreted as subject-oriented. Manner adverbs describe not only the property of action, but also the recognition of the person watching it. Used with a first-person subject, it makes us feel that the subject is seeing themselves from outside, indicating contradiction in the point of view. That is why (2b), where the adverbial phrase has no other reading than manner, seems unnatural. It can be natural, though, in a style where the speaker objectivizes themselves, or when the adverb is included in the volitional scope of the verb, meaning the subject behaved on purpose to look that way as in (2c).

## 2.2 Examples

We pick up examples where an adverb is used ambiguously. Readers are forced to modify their first reading afterwards, based on the assumption that the narrator is being sincere. (Underlines are ours.)

(3) “So far, so good,” he [Poirot] said. “They are straightening themselves.”

“They are getting blacker and blacker against Ralph Paton,” I observed gloomily. (Ch. 23)

Sheppard assumes Poirot has gathered enough evidence to charge Ralph Paton, Ackroyd’s stepson. Since it is an advantageous situation, there’s no reason for him to be gloomy. Readers are initially encouraged to do a subject-oriented reading, assuming Sheppard was trying to protect him, but later it proves to be a falsity.

(4) “Excuse me, sir, did the person telephoning use my name?”

“I’ll give you the exact words I heard. *‘Is that Dr Sheppard? Parker, the butler at Fernly, speaking. Will you please come at once, sir. Mr Ackroyd has been murdered.’*”

Parker and I stared at each other blankly. (Ch. 5)

Semantically, *blankly* can be interpreted either as describing the mental state of the two men, or the reaction they had shown, on learning that the call was a fake. Since it is a fabricated story of his own, Sheppard is not surprised, whereas Parker is genuinely astonished. Therefore, it would be appropriate to take the adverb as describing their outward reaction or manner.

(5) I had just reached the top when the telephone rang in the hall below.

“Mrs. Bates,” said Caroline, immediately.

“I’m afraid so,” I said ruefully. (Ch. 4)

As Sheppard planned to get a phone call that night, he knows his sister’s guess (it’s from one of his patients) is wrong, and is far from rueful, but just pretends to be so. It should be read as describing his intended behavior.

(6) “. . . He [Sheppard] must know that things looked very black against him [Paton]. Perhaps he knew more than the general public did –”

“I did,” I said ruefully. (Ch. 24)

While trapping Paton, Sheppard pretends to be his good friend. Therefore the adverb is not meant to express his true feelings, but his act or his intended performance.

(7) “. . . He [Paton] arrived at my house in the early hours of yesterday morning.”

I looked at him ruefully. (Ch. 24)

Sheppard had secretly sent Paton to a nursing home to make him look more suspicious. He is shocked to know that Poirot had found him, and gets truly rueful this time. *Ruefully* here should be taken as subject-oriented.

We have seen how the polysemy of the adverb is made use of to manipulate readers. When the narrator is one of the characters in the story, readers tend to adopt their point of view, experiencing the story through their eyes. That’s why adverbs used by a narrator-character are more likely to be understood as subject-oriented, thus creating misdirection.

### 2.3 Misdirection by adverbials

Unlike (3)-(7) above, the past participles or a prepositional phrase, *surprised*, *in surprise* and *with an air of surprise*, are used as adverbs without dual meaning nor ambiguity as follows.

(8) a. “You know Mr. Ackroyd?” I said, slightly surprised. (Ch. 3)

b. “Who told you so?” I asked, very much surprised. (Ch. 3)

c. “How did you know?” I asked, somewhat surprised. (Ch. 15)

d. “Not you?” I exclaimed in surprise. (Ch. 20)

e. “Not at all,” I said, with an air of surprise and a tinge of apology in my manner.  
(Ch.11)

The surprise of the subject-narrator is presented as a fact in varying degrees in (8 a-d) and as intentional behavior in (e). In this story, as seen above, various kinds of adverbial expressions are used according to whether the narrator wants to be frank or vague. The narrator, bearing a dreadful secret, has to be very careful in imparting information. If he reveals what is in his mind, the suspense of the novel would be lost. He shows his true feelings when there is no inconvenience, and obscures it when the crucial part is concerned. The heavy use of adverbs is a technique to maintain the mystery till the end without being unfair.

Traditionally, the usage of adverbs has attracted little attention in analyzing narrative. But it forms an important part of Christie’s techniques to manipulate and misdirect readers.

### 3. Disnarration

#### 3.1 The unnarrated

Prince (1992) focuses on ‘the unnarrated or nonnarrated, and the disnarrated’ and indicates how to narrate and disnarrate plays the significant role in stories.

In Ch. 4, having failed to persuade Ackroyd to read through the letter, Sheppard leaves him. The passage underlined in (9) is his report thereon, which in the last chapter, ‘Apologia’, he quotes as in italics in (10), admiring of his own ingenuity ‘as a writer’.

(9) The more you urge him to do a thing, the more determined he is not to do it. All my arguments were in vain.

The letters had been brought in at twenty minutes to nine. It was just on ten minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread. I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, looking back and wondering if there was anything I had left undone. I could think of nothing. (Ch. 4)

(10) I am rather pleased with myself as a writer. What could be neater, for instance, than the following:

*“The letters were brought in at twenty minutes to nine. It was just on ten minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread. I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, looking back and wondering if there was anything I had left undone.”*

All true, you see. But suppose I had put a row of stars after the first sentence!

Would somebody then have wondered what exactly happened in that blank ten minutes? (Ch.27 'Apologia')

Then he confesses 'what exactly happened in that blank ten minutes'. In fact, the ten minutes was unnarrated in his earlier report. Nothing is told about what happened then.

Usually we recognize the flow of time in narrative focusing on prominent events. So we tend to assume that during the ten minutes there was no progress in getting him to read it. Readers are distracted from the unnarrated period of the crime by the highlighted beginning and ending.

### 3.2 The disnarrated

In (11), after 'wondering if there was anything I had left undone', Sheppard reflects 'I could think of nothing', which is the disnarrated in negative mood. In 'Apologia' its counterpart, 'Nothing had been left undone' in (12), is followed by 'The dictaphone was on the table by the window, timed to go off at nine-thirty' etc. Here we realize that Sheppard was just making sure that his alibi manufacturing was flawless.

(11) . . . . All my arguments were in vain.

. . . . I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, looking back and wondering if there was anything I had left undone. I could think of nothing. (Ch.4)

(12) ". . . . *I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, looking back and wondering if there was anything I had left undone.*"

All true, you see. But suppose I had put a row of stars after the first sentence! Would somebody then have wondered what exactly happened in that blank ten minutes?

When I looked round the room from the door, I was quite satisfied. Nothing had been left undone. The dictaphone was on the table by the window, . . .

(Ch.27 'Apologia')

Incidentally, *left undone* in (11) implies that something important has already been done. In association with the previous narrative, 'All my arguments were in vain', the expression can convey his reflection on whether he did his best to persuade Ackroyd, suggesting that Ackroyd is still alive around that time.

### 3.3 Distraction

Based on the proposition of Prince, we have seen typical examples of disnarration, which trigger distraction. Poirot's comment on Sheppard's report is much to the point as

in: 'You have recorded all the facts faithfully and exactly—though you have shown yourself becoming reticent as to your own share in them'. Sheppard cleverly evades telling the whole truth by way of disnarration.

Note also that Sheppard has diverse roles. As a narrator he tells events by his own wording, but as a murderer he cannot tell everything. Moreover, as a doctor, he was able to detect that Mrs. Ferrars had poisoned her husband and go to the scene of the crime with his doctor's bag to carry the dictaphone. These serve enough to keep him off the suspect list, leading to well-planned information design.

#### 4. Conclusion

Writers of detective stories are supposed to observe fairness, and it is on this point that this story has aroused criticism.

In 'Apologia' Christie defends herself in narrator's words. Besides, she adopts various techniques to distract readers observing fairness. Here we have focused on three aspects. First, the switching among shadings of modal expressions and categorical assertions is manipulated effectively. Second, the polysemy of subject-oriented and manner adverbs is made use of to misdirect readers. Third, to distract readers, this story takes advantage of cognitive inclination of economy that what is not narrated in full form, disnarration, is not worthwhile.

These techniques serve to misdirect readers, which in turn urges us to read again. Here we find the skillful information design by Christie to attract and sometimes distract readers, observing fairness.

#### **Text**

Christie, A. 'The Murder of Roger Ackroyd', in (1985) *Agatha Christie: Five Classic Murder Mysteries*. pp. 163-302. New York: Avenel Books.

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