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Language and Style in Douglas Adams's Writings

Introduction

This paper is based on a study conducted for my MLitt dissertation (Bragina 2007). It is a linguistic examination of literary texts by Douglas Adams, the author of such books as *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*. I look particularly at stylistic features of these texts in relation to the genres of science fiction and comedy. The analysis reveals that the combination of the two genres on the linguistic level produces powerful stylistic effects, suspense being an important feature in relation to both genres. This paper consists of three parts. Firstly, I examine linguistic reference, drawing particularly on Emmott's (2006) notion of underspecification. Secondly, I study metaphor, using the Lakoffian theory of conceptual metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999, Lakoff and Turner 1989). Thirdly, I investigate phraseology, drawing on a combination of Eastern European (Kunin 1970, 1986, Ginzburg et al. 1979, Arnold 1986, Naciscione 2001) and Western approaches (Cowie 1998, Moon 1998) to the study of phraseology. The completed study positions Adams's combination of the genres of science fiction and comedy as a source of a highly distinctive style of narrative.

Extensive linguistic study has been conducted on the genres of both science fiction by such scholars as Meyers (1980) and Stockwell (2000), and humour by such scholars as Nash (1985), Raskin (1985) and Simpson (2003) among others. However, the works of Adams have received little or no mention in these studies. The studies on Adams are mainly biographical (e. g. Webb 2003) or literary (e. g. Antor 1998). Corduas et al. (2008) provide statistics summarising types of humour in Adams's *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, but contains no detailed discussion of particular examples, nor any mention of the genre of science fiction.

Humour and science fiction may seem like odd genres to occur together, but they do in fact have something in common - they both tend to deal with the unexpected. As Stockwell writes, any science fiction text is an alternative reality (2000: 203), and in an alternative world danger and thus suspense and surprise are major issues (meeting aliens, etc.), so often we are presented with the unexpected. As for humour, according to Raskin's (1985) Semantic Script Theory of Humour (see also Attardo and Raskin 1991 for the updated Semantic Script Theory of Verbal Humour), it is all about getting the opposite of what we expect, and in the case of verbal humour often flouting Grice's (1989) maxims (Nash 1985, Raskin 1985, Simpson 2003). My work shows how special stylistic uses of language create fresh humorous perspectives on both unusual and everyday events in the stories.

My dissertation contains numerous examples of stylistically distinctive applications of referring and metaphorical expressions, as well as of stylistic use of phraseological units

(PUs), but due to the time restrictions of the talk I can only analyse a brief selection in my presentation.

1. Reference

The theoretical background I used for the analysis of referring expressions draws on the research conducted by Emmott (2006, see also 1997). To quote: ‘Referring expressions are generally of more stylistic interest when they break the usual patterns of language, since then they may be used for special effects’ (2006: 441). Very relevant to Adams’s writings is the device of underspecification (Emmott 2006, cf. Hardy 2005), which is basically “a greater use of pronouns than expected and/or the use of vague lexical terms” (Emmott 2006: 443) instead of fuller referring expressions. Underspecification is a very useful device for creating suspense within the narrative, especially when it is coupled with the technique of gradual disclosure (see Emmott 2006: 455 and Leech and Short 2007: 176-7, also see Wulff 1996 for the discussion of cataphoric text elements as means of creating suspense), as will be shown in the examples below.

In the following example a certain degree of suspense is present, which is achieved by means of using the indefinite underspecified pronoun ‘something’:

On this particular Thursday, **something** was moving quietly through the ionosphere many miles above the surface of the planet;... (*The Hitch-Hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, p.23)

The level of suspense in this instance is not very high, because the reader already knows that s/he is reading a science fiction book, and with the help of the phrase “the surface of the planet” s/he can quite easily infer that ‘something’ refers to an alien aircraft of some sort. The stylistic effect of this particular instance is intensified through comedy by means of adding incongruously specific details.

...several somethings in fact, several dozen huge yellow chunky slablike somethings,
(ibid.)

Adams specifies the quantity of the ‘somethings’ (‘several (dozen)’) and pluralises the pronoun, hence breaking the basic grammatical rules for indefinite pronouns. He also adds details about the size, colour and shape of the objects in pre-modifier position instead of the usual practice of leaving the pronoun unmodified or adding post-modifications (Quirk et al. (1985: 1294) allows for the rare use of pre-modifiers of indefinite pronouns for special stylistic uses). This creates a comic effect, which is intensified as Adams keeps using the word for an unusually long stretch of the text, covering several pages, making this possible by switching to the viewpoint of a character that sees the objects for the first time.

What Mr Prosser had noticed was that **huge yellow somethings** were screaming through the clouds. Impossibly **huge yellow somethings**. (pp. 28-29)

Finally, it is disclosed to the reader that the huge yellow somethings are indeed an alien spacecraft belonging to the aliens called the Vogons. This is done through the viewpoint of the character who knows this for a fact, for he is himself an alien - Ford Prefect:

Of all the races in all of the Galaxy who could have come and said a big hello to planet Earth, [Ford Prefect] thought, didn't it just have to be the Vogons. ... As **the Vogon craft** screamed through the air high above him he opened his satchel. (p. 29)

The comic effect of the example above is ensured by means of incongruous overstretching of the suspense.

The following example is another case of underspecification and in this case the level of suspense is quite high from the very beginning. Moreover, not one but two entities are underspecified.

[Ford] heard a slight groan. By the light of the match he saw **a heavy shape** moving slightly on the floor. Quickly he shook the match out and reached in his pocket, found **what he was looking for** and took **it** out. He ripped **it** open and shook **it**. He crouched **it** on the floor. **The shape** moved again. (*The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, p. 41)

The character Ford Prefect finds himself on board a Vogon spaceship. The reader does not know what or who the heavy shape is, neither does s/he know what is it that Ford takes out of his pocket. However, the reader's text world knowledge (see Werth 1999) already contains awareness of the existence of a hostile alien race. Therefore it is very likely that the reader interprets the 'shape' expressions as referring to some hostile creature ready to attack Ford. This would go well with interpreting the 'it' expressions as

referring to some weapon that Ford might use to defend himself. Thus, the suspense reaches a very high level. But the situation is resolved in a comic anticlimax:

Ford Prefect said: 'I bought **some peanuts.**'

Arthur Dent moved, and groaned again, muttering incoherently. (ibid.)

The reader is now made to draw on her/his text world knowledge to recollect the episode of Ford's buying a packet of peanuts at a pub, and again via deductive inference his manipulations with the 'it' object become clear, while through the corresponding predicates 'move' and 'groan' and the presupposition triggered by the word 'again' it becomes clear that the expressions 'the shape' and 'Arthur Dent' refer to one and the same entity, which is the main character of the story . And so a very strong comical effect is produced.

2. Metaphor

For the investigation of metaphorical expressions, I based my analysis on Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) theory of conceptual metaphor. One of the most common types of metaphorical expressions in Adams's texts is personification. According to Lakoff and Turner (1989), nearly any personification bears prominent connections with the general EVENTS ARE ACTIONS metaphor.

The following example shows how the forces of evolution are personified in connection with the evolution of a very unpleasant alien race of Vogons.

... it was as if the forces of evolution had simply **given up** on [the Vogons] there and then, had **turned aside in disgust** and **written them off** as an ugly and unfortunate mistake. (*The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* p. 39)

Here we find a personification that can be identified as FORCES OF EVOLUTION ARE DEVELOPERS. Via the EVENTS ARE ACTIONS metaphor we can interpret that the absence of any changes (that is events) in the evolution of the Vogon race is presented through the personified forces of evolution refusing to act upon them – ABSENCE OF EVENTS IS ABSENCE OF ACTIONS. The comical effect is created by elaborating the metaphor adding the human emotion of disgust.

In the following example the sun is personified as it is rising above planet Earth.

When the sun came up that morning it shed its thin watery light over a vast area heaving with wailing hairdressers, public relations executives, opinion pollsters and the rest, all clawing their way desperately to dry land.

A less strong-minded sun would probably have gone straight back down again, but it continued to climb its way through the sky and after a while the influence of its warming rays began to have some restoring effect on the feebly struggling creatures. (*The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, p. 274)

The sun is presented as an entity that acts of its own free will, and so the sunrise is an action that the sun has chosen to perform because it possesses a human quality of strong-mindedness. Through this device of elaboration we can identify the personification as THE SUN IS A STRONG-MINDED PERSON, which is brought forward via SUNRISE IS AN ACTION PERFORMED BY THE SUN metaphor. Stylistically, personifying the

sun serves well the creation of the appropriate comic mood in a book like Adams's, but also the fact that the sun is a celestial body is in line with the science fiction genre of the text. And adding the quality of strong-mindedness and the actual wording of the expression in bold implies the existence of other suns, which is true to the text world of the text. The personification brings forth the comic effect – Adams is satirising the dull monotonous routine of the life on Earth – it is only the sun's strong-mindedness that makes it rise every morning.

3. Phraseology

The theory on phraseology has been developing for just over half a century, so it is still a comparatively new and developing branch of linguistics. For my research, I have chosen to combine the findings of the two major schools addressing the issue of phraseology – the Western and the Eastern European ones. The Western school is represented by such scholars as Moon (1998) and Cowie (1998) and deserves much credit for putting a lot of emphasis on practical analysis. The Eastern European school, led by Kunin (1970, 1986) (see also Ginzburg et al. 1979, Arnold 1986), which adopts a very scrupulous theoretical approach and deserves credit for positioning phraseology as a separate branch of linguistics.

My analysis is based on the research and terminology offered to describe the functioning of phraseological units (PUs) in discourse by Naciscione (2001), who is a pioneer in combining the Western and the Eastern European approaches to phraseology. She defines

a phraseological unit as ‘a stable cohesive combination of words with fully or partially figurative meaning’ (2001: 20), e.g. ‘to kick the bucket’ or ‘to be on one’s last legs’. The key notion in the stylistic analysis of PUs in literary texts is that of instantial stylistic use of PUs, which Naciscione describes as ‘a particular instance of a unique stylistic application of a PU in a discourse which results in significant changes in its form and meaning determined by the context’ (ibid.: 28).

The following short excerpt from the text of Adam’s *Life, the Universe and Everything* contains an instance of what Naciscione describes as phraseological allusion, a type of instantial use in which a PU never appears in its base form – the one that is stored in our memory as language users (ibid.: 99):

[Arthur’s] head was swimming freestyle, but someone in his stomach was doing the butterfly. (*Life, the Universe and Everything*, p. 407)

Arthur Dent is flying in the air and is hit by something. When he wakes up he finds himself still flying, but on a small piece of ground. He looks over the edge of the piece of ground, and what he is feeling is described by this sentence. The first clause can be interpreted as a novel metaphor mapping the notion of dizziness which is can also expressed by the phrase ‘one’s head is spinning’ onto a style of swimming. There is a parallelism between the first and the second clause that is based on the semantic field of body parts and styles of swimming, the first part containing the words ‘head’ and ‘freestyle’ and the second – ‘stomach’ and ‘butterfly’. The words ‘stomach’ and ‘butterfly’, in their own turn, appearing together in a coherent phrase can be interpreted

as components of the PU ‘to have butterflies in one’s stomach’. Although the PU does not appear in its usual form, we can still detect its presence because it is semantically applicable to the situation within the narrative. The PU expresses the notion of intense mental experience of nervousness that borders on physical discomfort and is an appropriate description of what Arthur is feeling. The components of the PU are also part of a metaphorical parallelism and one of them (‘butterfly’) thus conveys a double meaning, one belonging to the imagery of the novel metaphor and the other to the imagery of the PU, and thus the stylistic effect is intensified.

The following several examples from Adam’s works contain instances of derivations from existing PUs containing component replacement or insertion, whose choice is determined by the science fiction genre of the text:

‘Zaphod,’ said Ford, ‘whilst you are still capable of speech, would you care to tell me **what the photon** happened?’ (*The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, p. 218)

Ford shook his head.

‘He’s **had a bad two million years**,’ he said to the policeman... (*Life, the Universe and Everything*, p. 324)

Ford shivered, partly with the cold, but partly with the memory of stories his favourite mother used to tell him when he was a mere slip of a Betelgeusian, **ankle high to an Arcturan Megagrasshopper**... (*The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, p. 260)

The reader can easily recognise widely used PUs in the expressions in bold, but it is obvious that in the first two cases the variable component is not chosen from the

conventional list of variants. In the first case, instead of such usual variants as ‘what the hell’ or ‘what the devil’, a term from quantum mechanics is used; and in the next case the temporal expressions goes beyond the natural lifespan of a human being, but is nonetheless true to the text world of the story as the characters have been time-travelling. In the last example the reader can find that components are inserted into a widespread PU to turn a tiny earthly grasshopper into an alien **Arcturan Megagrasshopper**. Through the incongruity between the semantics of the PU and the prefix ‘mega’ a strong comic effect is produced yet again.

In conclusion, Adams’s texts are saturated with effective stylistic expressions of the kind I have just demonstrated. Douglas Adams uses referring, metaphorical and phraseological expressions as a means for producing powerful stylistic effects and creating vivid imagery. Adams’s stylistic choices are mostly determined by two main factors that govern his texts – the genre of comedy and the genre of science fiction. It is possible to suggest that this combination is responsible for the large success Adams’s books have had among readers, but it is also the factor that allows us to position these texts as valuable material for academic study.

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