

## Metalinguistic commentary in Fielding's *Tom Jones*

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In the present paper the linguistic aspect of commentary in Fielding's *Tom Jones* is examined. As a starting point, it is worth citing the beginning of the very first sentence of the opening page of the novel. The very first sentence begins like this: An author ought to consider himself, not as a Gentleman who gives a private or eleemosynary Treat, ... and so on. Here the subject 'An author' literally shows that this novel starts together with an author. Throughout the novel the author is willing to address his readers as obtrusively as possible. His authorial presence is so pervasive that the novel itself is like a depository of authorial commentaries. Among his commentaries, metalinguistic ones are stylistically interesting and deserve detailed consideration. So my main concern in this paper is the author's verbal strategy in his linguistic means of signalling metalinguistic commentary.

Let us first take a look at the types of expressions which occur in this novel to grasp the general picture of the explicit metalinguistic commentary. The list of examples is not completely exhaustive, but I provided as many as possible to let you get the feel of the variety of these expressions.

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<b>Words and phrases</b>	
or rather (50)	namely (27)
or indeed (17)	that is (23)
or perhaps (15)	viz. (20)
or even (13)	that is to say (9)
or at least (11)	to wit (5)
or at most (1)	i.e. (3)
or at best (1)	
or possibly (1)	
or if possible (1)	

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'Or' is often accompanied by adverbs such as 'rather', 'indeed', 'perhaps', 'even', 'at least' and the like. All these words and phrases are listed in order of decreasing frequency, as you can see in the figures in brackets.

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**Adverbials (1): [*in* ---- type]**

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in the vulgar Tongue	in simple Phrase
in plain Language	in the following obliging Phrase
in plainer Language	in the worldly Sense of the Word
in our Language	in a literal Sense
in the strictest Purity of Language	in the metaphorical Sense
in their Language	in the other and truer Sense
in vulgar Language	in the purest Sense of the Word
in the same Language	in the legal Sense
in plain English	in a moral Sense
in English	in either Sense
in the vulgar Phrase	in the Sense it is here applied
in vulgar Phrase	in very pathetic Terms
in the English Phrase	in the gentlest Terms
in the hunting Phrase	in a Word
in the polite Phrase	in other Words
in the military Phrase	in short

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**Adverbials (2): [*according to* ---- type]**

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according to vulgar Phrase
according to the vulgar Phrase
according to the Phrase
according to the present universally received Sense of that Phrase
according to the old Phrase
according to the old Adage
according to the Proverb
according to Horace

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**Adverbials (3): [*an absolute to-infinitive* type]**

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to express it more properly in a legal Phrase	to speak more truly
to express myself less figuratively	to speak plainly
to say the Truth	to speak more properly
to say Truth	to speak out boldly at once
to confess the Truth	to speak simply, and without any Metaphor
to speak the Truth	to use a common Phrase
to speak honestly	to use the common Phrase
to speak truly	

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to use that Word in its common Signification	to explain this seeming Paradox at once
to use the Language of Sportsmen	to continue the same Metaphor
to use the Language of Advertisements	to omit other particulars
to use the Squire's Expression	to declare honestly
to use a purer Phrase	to lay aside all allegory
to tell you the Truth	to drop all Metaphor and Figure
to tell you plainly	to carry the Metaphor one step farther
to borrow a Phrase from the Lady	to be plain
to borrow no improper Metaphor on the Occasion	to be concise

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**Clauses (1): [*if* ---- type]**

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if I may use that Expression	if the Phrase may be allowed me
if I may use the Expression	if the Expression may be allowed me
if I may use the Metaphor	if indeed it may be called one
if I may so express myself	if it may be so called
if I may so say	if it may not be called ...
if they mean anything	if indeed it could be so called
if it may be called so	if it can be called one

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**Clauses (2): [*as* ---- type]**

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as it is called	as they now termed it
as it is vulgarly called	as I may call it
as it is commonly called	just as the Reader pleases to call it
as the Phrase is	as she called him
as the vulgar Phrase is	as the Proverb says
as they are sometimes called in our own Language	as a Man may say
as they are vulgarly called	as the Poet tells us
as they call it	as the Poets call it
as they term it	as the gigantic Poet Lee calls it
as they are pleased to call it	as Prior excellently well remarks
as she called it	as Shakespeare phrases it
as he called it	as Mr. Pope observes
as she pleased to call it	as Aristotle calls it
as he phrased it	as Milton phrases it
as he said he would venture to call it	

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<b>Clauses (3): [<i>what</i> ---- type]</b>	<b>Clauses (4): [<i>which</i> ---- type]</b>
what they call	which is generally called
what we call	which is vulgarly called
what the World calls	which is commonly called
what the Ladies are pleased to call	which you chuse to call him
what is called	which may be called
what could be called	which might ... be called
what is commonly called	which are called
what is vulgarly called	which is generally understood as a synonymous Term
what may be called	with ...
what the Antients called	which hath ... been always held a synonymous
what he frequently called her	Expression with ...
	by which the Vulgar denote ...
	which ... is thus expressed in English

<b>Clauses (5): [<i>for so</i> ---- <i>call(ed)</i> ---- type]</b>
(for so Mr. Allworthy suffered himself to be called.)
for so the Bird was called
For so he called the Sirloin
(for so I think I may call him, notwithstanding his Birth)
(for so he called his favourite Mare)
(for so all great Books are called)
(for so I think he may be called)
(for so the Landlord chose to call the Distillation from Malt)
for so she called him
(for so the Mistress of the House was called)

Before proceeding to discuss some examples, I should like to make a few observations on some lexical and grammatical features.

As for the lexical items, first I should like you to pay attention to the words listed below.

<b>Lexical point (1)</b>
in the vulgar Tongue
in vulgar Language
in the vulgar Phrase
in vulgar Phrase
in the polite Phrase
in the worldly Sense of the Word

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according to	vulgar Phrase
according to the	vulgar Phrase
according to the present	universally received Sense of that Phrase

to use a	common Phrase
to use the	common Phrase
to use that Word in its	common Signification

as it is	vulgarly called
as they are	vulgarly called
as it is	commonly called
as the	vulgar Phrase is

what	the World calls
what is	commonly called
what is	vulgarly called

which is	vulgarly called
which is	commonly called
by which	the Vulgar denote ...

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All these words are reflective of the author's awareness of language and social class. The language the author uses is based on the 18th-century gentleman's code. Its style is generally considered to be elegant and belongs to the upper-class people. So the use of 'vulgar', 'common', 'universally received' and so on reveals his interest in spoken language of ordinary people, or lower-class people of his days.

The other lexical items to note are the words as follows.

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### **Lexical point (2)**

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in	plain Language
in	plain English
in the	hunting Phrase
in the	military Phrase
to express it more properly in a	legal Phrase
to express myself	less figuratively
to speak	simply, and without any Metaphor
to use	the Language of Sportsmen

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to use the Language of Advertisements  
to drop all Metaphor and Figure  
to carry the Metaphor one step farther

if I may use the Metaphor

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They are terms denoting style levels. By inserting phrases including these terms, he switches from one style to another. Such lexical features may lead us to a good place to start observing his manipulation of various stylistic levels of language.

Then I will mention some grammatical features. The above examples cited from the novel fall into two categories syntactically: appositive use and parenthetical use. Of all the appositive examples, the most typical one and by far the most frequent kind in the novel is the [A or rather B] type phrase. The appositive example like this consists of two elements A and B, and both A and B basically have the same referent.

The majority of adverbial and clausal examples go into the category of parenthetical use. Remarks in the parenthetical structure literally intrude or obtrude into a sentence, medially or finally. This very intrusive or obtrusive nature partly explains one of the reasons why the author is called the intrusive or obtrusive one.

Let me have a look at examples in context. First from the perspective of appositive structures. My observation reveals that there are four types of subcategories according to the semantic relationship between two elements.

- (a) paraphrase or reformulation
- (b) reversal
- (c) description or explanation
- (d) wordplay

(a) paraphrase or reformulation

In this category 'or rather' is used to correct the previous element, and to give a more exact expression. Normally each element has one lexical item: a verb or a noun.

I shall have a quick glimpse of the examples.

- (1) The superior Merit of Sophia, totally eclipsed, **or rather** extinguished all the Beauties of the poor Girl ... (V. v)

Basically both verbs 'eclipse' and 'extinguish' mean 'to obscure', but the latter one 'extinguish' sounds more straightforward or candid than the former 'eclipse'. The factual account of obscuring seems to be reinforced.

- (2) So having amused, **or rather** tormented himself with the Thoughts of his Sophia, ... (VIII. ii)

‘Himself’ refers to ‘Tom’, the hero of this novel. Using the verb ‘torment’ instead of ‘amuse’ might allude to some difficulties lying ahead of his future relationship with Sophia.

- (3) Mrs. Western spoke, **or rather** thundered in Answer; but as she was hardly articulate, we cannot be very certain of the identical Words: We shall, therefore, omit inserting a Speech, which, at best, would not greatly redound to her Honour. (VII. viii)

‘Spoke’ is the superordinate of ‘thundered’. In the rest of this extract we have been given a glimpse of the author’s typical explanatory comment. It is interesting to note that the author is concerned with the issue of whether or not to insert Mrs. Western’s speech and continues to explain the reason of not inserting her speech in a metalinguistic manner.

- (4) Jones ... ran, **or rather** slid, down the Hill, and without the least Apprehension or Concern for his own Safety, made directly to the Thicket whence the Sound had issued. (IX. ii)

The verb ‘slid’ conveys the way Jones went down the hill more vividly with a pressing nuance.

- (5) ... the Parlour, **or rather** Hole, where Jones was seated ... (VII. x)

‘Hole’ is a term of contempt or depreciation for any place. The use of the word with such connotation seems to be tinged with cynicism.

- (6) Now in the Imagination of the half-drunk Clown, as he staggers through the Church-yard, **or rather** Charnel-yard, to his Home, Fear paints the bloody Hobgoblin ... (X. ii)

‘Charnel-yard’ is more likely to evoke the feeling of weirdness or eeriness. Spooky atmosphere is heightened by this word in combination with the reference to the fear of the half-drunk clown.

(b) reversal

This category includes examples in which the second element expresses an opposite or nearly opposite notion to that of the previous element.

- (7) ... the Doctor had in his Youth been obliged to study Physick, **or rather** to say he studied it; for in reality Books of this Kind were almost the only ones with which he was unacquainted ... (I. x)

The fact of ‘studying Physick’ might be completely reversed the moment ‘to say’ was added to

the statement 'he studied it'. After that, through the use of the phrase 'in reality' the author goes further to reveal the Doctor's ignorance of Physick.

- (8) ... Partridge came capering into the Room, as was his Custom when he brought, **or fancied he brought** any good Tidings. (XV. xii)

By inserting the verb 'fancied', the fact of Partridge's bringing 'any good tidings' was drawn into the realm of his imagination. The interpretation of whether he really brought good news or not is left to the readers.

- (9) Here ill Luck, **or rather good Luck**, sent Mrs. Western to see her Maid in Tears, which began to flow plentifully at her Approach ... (VII. viii)

Whether it is ill luck or good luck depends on the perspective. They are two sides of the same coin. This way of putting it invites a positive act of interpretation on the part of the readers.

(c) description or explanation

Examples of description or explanation tend to be verbose or wordy.

- (10) This was no other than the Landlord of the House, **or rather the Husband of the Landlady**. (VIII. vii)

He is the Landlord in name only who doesn't concern 'himself in the least with any Kind of Business'. The second element provides a peculiarly appropriate description of the Landlord.

- (11) ... being partly owing to the high Blood of their Ancestors, **viz. Blood made of rich Sauces and generous Wines**, and partly to an early Town Education. (I. xi)

This is the author's unique description of 'the high Blood', that is, the Blood of upper-class people, in the form of definition through the use of 'viz.'. Their life of luxury is caricatured in a humorous way with a touch of irony.

- (12) This was no other than the Arrival of young Nightingale dead drunk; **or rather in that State of Drunkenness which deprives Men of the Use of their Reason, without depriving them of the Use of their Limbs**. (XV. vii)

A state of 'being dead drunk' is rather comically explained.

(d) wordplay

Through the examples I have given in this category, I hope to illustrate one of the most



characteristic and entertaining uses in this novel.

- (13) ... nor did his well-scratched Face less denote her Talents (**or rather Talons**) of a different Kind (IV. viii)

Note a phonological similarity between ‘Talents’ and ‘Talons’. Scratches of his face are the sign of her ‘Talents’ which means her fighting ability. This word ‘Talents’ brings out a phonologically similar word ‘Talons’ referring to her nail marks, which obviously evokes a very violent image of the claws of a bird of prey.

A phonetic resemblance can also be seen in

- (14) She [Honour] ... laid down her Place, with as much Affectation of Content, **and indeed of Contempt**, as was ever practised at the Resignation of Places of much greater Importance. (VII. ix)

The phrase ‘and indeed’ is used in almost the same way as ‘or rather’. Sound similarity, just a consonant difference in this case, triggers a feeling of semantic closeness or ambivalence between the two words. In this context, it is content on the face of it, but her inward feeling is contempt.

- (15) In this Light then, **or rather in this Darkness**, I would have the Reader to consider these initial Essays. (V. i)

At a first reading ‘In this Light’ naturally means ‘in this aspect or viewpoint’. Then another meaning of ‘Brightness’ in the word ‘Light’ brings about an opposite notion ‘darkness’.

- (16) ... it is owing to his Goodness, that I did not long since perish for Want, and leave my poor little Wretches, two destitute, helpless, friendless Orphans, to the Care, **or rather to the Cruelty** of the World. (XIV. v)

‘Leave (someone) to the care of’ is a set phrase, but the word ‘care’ is replaced in the second element. Considering the severe reality of being ‘destitute, helpless and friendless’ the unfavourable connotation of ‘Cruelty’ goes well instead of the favourable-sounding ‘Care’.

Next we should like to consider some examples from the perspective of parenthetical structures. Among many features, I will highlight two characteristic ones. First point: as a signal to call for constant attention to the meanings of words. Second point: an aspect of the language of the vulgar, that is, common, ordinary people.

As for the first point, the conditional *if*-clause is frequently used to make readers constantly aware of the meaning of words. For example:

- (17) ... Physicians mean (if they mean any thing) by the Fever on the Spirits. (XI. iii)  
(18) ... his good Genius (if he really had any) seems to have done. (XVI. x)

The insertion of *if*-clauses in (17) and (18) make readers stop and think about reconstructing the basic meanings. In other words, these clauses can be said to prompt readers to the active participation in the reading. In the examples (19) to (21), the parenthetic clauses make comments on words and phrases where an evaluative judgement is involved.

- (19) Indeed she was so far from regretting Want of Beauty, that she never mention'd that Perfection (if it can be called one) without Contempt ... (I. ii)

The author casts some doubts about putting the conceptions of both 'Beauty' and 'Perfection' on an equal level.

- (20) The Squire, to whom that poor Woman had been a faithful upper Servant all the Time of their Marriage, had returned that Behaviour, by making what the World calls a good Husband. (VII. iv)

By adding the clause 'what the World calls' the interpretation of 'good' is left to the reader. As a result readers try to work out the nuance of the word 'good' denoted by the World, that is, the general public in those days.

- (21) She had lived several Years a Servant with a Schoolmaster, who ... had the Good-nature, or Folly (just as the Reader pleases to call it,) to instruct her so far. (I. vi)

Behind the comment 'just as the Reader pleases to call it' seems to lie a perception that there is not much difference between 'good-nature' and 'folly'. After all the reading is up to the reader.

I shall proceed to discuss the second point in examples (22) to (26): an aspect of the language of the common, ordinary people in those days. As I said earlier, basically the author's manner of narrating and addressing to the reader assumes a discourse style of an 18th-century gentleman. Therefore occasional intrusion of vulgar or common phrases on the elegant tone of the gentleman's could be foregrounded.

- (22) My good Landlady was, (according to vulgar Phrase) struck all of a Heap by this Relation. (VIII. ii)

The phrase 'be struck all of a Heap' means 'be extremely disconcerted'.

- (23) ... that sagacious Woman began, in the vulgar Phrase, to smell a Rat. (X. ix)

‘To smell a Rat’ means ‘to suspect something’. Here in relation to this phrase the use of the adjective ‘sagacious’ is also worth noting. This word normally means ‘wise or shrewd’. It also had the older meaning ‘acute in perception, especially by the sense of smell’. In terms of the sense of smell there must have been a close association in terms of the sense of smell between the word ‘sagacious’ and the phrase ‘to smell a Rat’.

- (24) The sage Pedagogue was contented with the Vent which he had already given to his Indignation; and, as the vulgar Phrase is, immediately drew in his Horns. (XII. xiii)

‘Draw in one’s horns’ means ‘become less assertive and calm down’. What with ‘Vent’ and ‘Indignation’, strong emotional overtones could be detected in this passage, and so the sudden switch to the use of a vulgar phrase has the effect of keeping a certain distance.

- (25) She had been greatly, therefore, disappointed in the Morning when Mrs. Western had changed her Mind on the very Point of Departure, and had been in what is vulgarly called, a glouting Humour ever since. (VII. viii)

‘In a glouting Humour’ means ‘in a bad mood’. This extract is narrated from the viewpoint of Mrs. Western’s maidservant. There may be a possibility that the insertion of this vulgar sounding phrase serves to reflect the speech tone of lower-class characters.

- (26) Victory must now have fallen to the Side of the Travellers ... had not Susan the Chambermaid come luckily to support her Mistress. This Susan was as two-handed a Wench (according to the Phrase) as any in the Country ... (IX. iii)

Susan has a big and bulky body of a robust type. The use of a direct and concrete word might add vividness to the description.

Through the examples (22) to (26) it is interesting to note that the extracts containing vulgar or common phrases tend to occur in the description of lower-class people, or at least the scenes or actions which suggest some kind of vulgarity.

To summarise, we investigated metalinguistic commentary, focussing on linguistic forms. The examples have been viewed from two structural perspectives: appositive and parenthetic. The appositive structure is always concerned with two elements. What is of interest to note is the semantic relation between the two elements. Through the four subcategories we have already seen, we learn to appreciate the process of language selection the author manipulates and discover a meaningful relation between the two elements. The parenthetic structure has the effect in offering the readers the chance to become aware of the language itself and invite a positive act of interpretation. Sometimes the fixed notion is destroyed and we are forced to rearrange our conception.