Relevance theory and poetry: An inferential analysis

of Philip Larkin's 'Mr Bleaney'

Introduction

It is commonplace to say that literature and especially poetry is ambiguous and polysemic, but how do we actually interpret poetry? How is it possible that the very same text may evoke different and even opposing interpretations?

This presentation illustrates how pragmatics and, more precisely, relevance theory, provides a scientific, cognitive ground to understand how interpretations are based on inferences the reader might not be aware of at the beginning. To do so, I approach 'Mr Bleaney,' by British poet Philip Larkin (1922-1985), as a case study. First, I will focus on the relationship between Relevance theory and literature. Second, I will analyse some inferences made by the reader as she reads the text, in relation to the physical space, the poet's addressee and especially those related to the poet's identification with the main character in the poem, Mr Bleaney. Third, I will analyse two opposing interpretations of the poem. Overall, I argue that inferential analysis may help explain interpretations in poetry and thus become a firm first step towards a better understanding of other aspects of aesthetic and poetic effects.

In order to understand differing interpretations in poetry, we must take into account what happens in the mind of the reader. In other words, it is necessary to develop a *pragmatics* of literary interpretation. Pilkington (2000), Clark (2009a, 2009b), Kolaiti (2009), MacMahon (2014), Longhitano (2014) and others have undertaken this project. MacMahon, for instance, uses relevance theory to examine the construction of narrative character and voice. In her words:

> [I]t is necessary to have a pragmatics of communication and interpretation. Without such a theory, stylistic approaches, which pay attention only to form, inevitably fall into difficulties trying to account for why a particular form should have certain effects in a given context. Here I take a relevance theory view, which prioritises the interaction of decoded linguistic form with context. (MacMahon 2014: 90).

These insights can be useful to examine other genres. A pragmatics in poetry, for instance, would be aimed at describing the process that transforms the linguistic content of a poem into *relevant* meaning. This is regarded by relevance theory as something that increases and enriches the reader's knowledge of the world (not to mention the aesthetic pleasure it might produce, which is a related, complex issue that I will not discuss here).

Most of the research linking relevance theory to literature has focused on narrative, and, to my knowledge, Larkin's poems have been studied from a stylistics and discourse analysis perspective (Verdonk 1991), but not from the perspective of relevance theory.

1 Relevance theory and literature

A fundamental argument in relevance theory is that the semantic content of an utterance is not enough for communication; that is, it underdetermines its interpretation. Thus,

inferences from the hearer or addressee are indispensable to understand even the simplest utterance. As explained by Deidre Wilson, one of the founders of this theory:

> Utterance comprehension is seen as essentially an exercise in mind-reading, and the challenge for relevance theorists […] is precisely to explain how the closed formal system of language provides effective pieces of evidence which, combined with contextual information, enable successful comprehension to take place.
> (Wilson 2014: 131)

The hearer or addressee has to perform several tasks in order to understand the utterance, such as: reference assignment, disambiguation, or the recovery of propositional attitudes, figurative interpretations and implicit import (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 11).

The opening line of Larkin's poem—'This was Mr Bleaney's room'—may illustrate these tasks. To begin with, reference assignment has to be performed on the deictic 'This,' which is taken to refer to the place where the communicator and addressee are at the moment; then, disambiguation has to be performed on 'room,' which is taken to refer to the chamber where the communicator and the addressee are, rather than in the alternative sense of 'space,' as it is in fact used further on, in the line 'no room for books or bags'; finally, the propositional attitude of the speaker is assertive, rather than, say, interrogative or hypothetical; and so forth.

In relevance theory, the inferential process is of utmost importance in understanding an utterance. As Sperber and Wilson explain, 'An inferential process starts from a set of premises and results in a set of conclusions which follow logically from, or are at least warranted by, the premises' (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 12-13).

2 Inferential analysis of 'Mr Bleaney'

Philip Larkin (1922-1985) was regarded as the most famous English poet in his time,

and is still considered as one of the most prominent poets of the century. He wrote 'Mr

Bleaney' in 1955. I will now play for you a recording of the poem read by the author.

> **Mr Bleaney**
> 'This was Mr Bleaney's room. He stayed
> The whole time he was at the Bodies, till
> They moved him.' Flowered curtains, thin and frayed,
> Fall to within five inches of the sill,
>
> Whose window shows a strip of building land,
> Tussocky, littered. 'Mr Bleaney took
> My bit of garden properly in hand.'
> Bed, upright chair, sixty-watt bulb, no hook
>
> Behind the door, no room for books or bags -
> 'I'll take it'. So it happens that I lie
> Where Mr Bleaney lay, and stub my fags
> On the same saucer-souvenir, and try
>
> Stuffing my ears with cotton-wool, to drown
> The jabbering set jabbering set he egged her on to buy.
> I know his habits - what time he came down,
> His preference for sauce to gravy, why
>
> He kept on plugging at the four aways -
> Likewise their yearly frame: the Frinton folk
> Who put him up for summer holidays,
> And Christmas at his sister's house in Stoke.
>
> But if he stood and watched the frigid wind
> Tousling the clouds, lay on the fusty bed
> Telling himself that this was home, and grinned,
> And shivered, without shaking off the dread
>
> That how we live measures our own nature,
> And at his age having no more to show
> Than one hired box should make him pretty sure
> He warranted no better, I don't know.
> (Larkin 2012: 50)

2.1 Physical environment:

The poem starts with a deixis placing the poet in someone else's former room: '*This* was Mr Bleaney's room' (my emphasis). Then he describes the physical space. He *implicates* that the room is humble: that is to say, he willingly and purposefully communicates this assumption, though he does not do it explicitly. The implicature of humility is conveyed, first, by the austere view from the window: 'a strip of building land/ Tussocky, littered'; second, by the enumeration of furniture items—expeditious, on account of their scantiness: 'Bed, upright chair, sixty-watt bulb,' and third, by the explicit mention of a 'sixty -watt bulb,' which leads the reader to assume that this low-intensity light is the only source of illumination. Also, the poet refers to a non-existent 'hook,' which he would have expected to find behind the door. The explicit mention of something that is *not there* emphasises the austerity of the physical space.

2.2 The poet's addressee

The use of quotation marks in the opening line of the poem suggests two possible sources of the utterance, according to literary conventions: it is either a) spoken out by someone whom the poet quotes, or b) part of a mental monologue. Such a monologue may be the poet's or somebody else's. However, as the poem progresses, the first option proves true. This beginning *in medias res* shows the poet talking to someone whose identity and characteristics are unknown and gradually revealed by the on-going dialogue, rather than by external comment.

In lines 6 and 7, another statement is introduced between quotation marks and confirms that the reader is NOT being let into a mental monologue. Actually, someone is talking to the poet: 'Mr Bleaney took/ My bit of garden properly in hand.'

In line 10, the poet cites his own words in dialogue with the addressee, who as yet remains known to the reader: 'I'll take it.' His utterance brings to mind encyclopaedic entries[1] related to lease negotiations, and answers questions than might have been in the reader's mind from the beginning: why might the poet be interested in Mr Bleaney's former room? Whose is the voice that comments on the garden? The situation is now clear enough: the poet talks to the landlord/landlady, who is also probably the owner, as may be inferred from the sentimental attachment to the garden. Such an attachment is implied by the use of a possessive adjective ('*My* bit of garden'), and may incline the reader to think that the voice is a woman's. This inclination depends on the stereotypical[2], and therefore fallible, assumption that a woman may be more interested in chatting about a garden than a man. Anyway, in line 14 this assumption will be confirmed by the object pronoun *her*: 'The jabbering set he egged *her* on to buy.'

2.3 The poet's identification with Bleaney

From the moment the poet takes the room, he starts identifying with the previous tenant. This identification includes using Bleaney's personal items, for example the saucer-souvenir he uses as an ashtray ('stub my fags') and his bed, which is not explicitly mentioned but referred to by contextual enrichment of the utterance 'I lie/ Where Mr Bleaney lay.' He gets to the point of commenting on Bleaney's habits. Whether the poet *knows* anything about them or merely *imagines* them is unclear at this point of the poem: there is no certainty that he had known Bleaney personally, despite the fact that the landlady talks as if the poet had known him. There is no mention either about how the poet might have known Bleaney's daily schedule ('what time he came down'), his

tastes in food ('His preference for sauce to gravy'), his inclination for gambling ('He kept on plugging at the four aways'), or whose house he used to visit during the holidays ('the Frinton folk/ Who put him up for summer holidays,/ And Christmas at his sister's house in Stoke').

In any case, the poet adopts an assertive, matter-of-fact tone, thereby disregarding the origin and veracity of his assumptions in favour of his own perception. What really matters is what he imagines, probably by observing Bleaney's belongings in the room. This impression is reinforced in the two last stanzas.

The poem ends with eight lines forming a long subjunctive sentence: 'But if he stood and watched the frigid wind…' The use of the subjunctive mood provides further proof that imagination is favoured over knowledge or inference: what matters most is what Bleaney represents to the poet. In the closing quatrains, the poet imagines the obscure thoughts of someone who has become his *alter ego*.

As mentioned, the poet's identification with Bleaney started by using his personal belongings. Then he felt free to imagine general traits of Bleaney's personality, such as an inclination for gambling or a predictable social life. Finally, the degree of empathy is such that the poet imagines a lonely man who observes his room, smiles to himself, and tries to get rid of 'the dread/ That how we live measures our own nature,' unsuccessfully. This dread suggests that his 'hired box' accounts for a nearly worthless existence.

Despite this growing identification, in the closing line the poet forsakes assertiveness. For the first time he acknowledges ignoring what his predecessor might have experienced. The hypothesis that starts in the sixth stanza does not conclude with a consequence, as might be expected from the grammatical structure 'if *X,* then *Y.*'

Instead, the poet states 'I don't know.' That is to say, 'I don't know if Bleaney felt the feelings I have been describing.' Such uncertainty communicates the salient implication, 'but *I do* feel them.'

How is this communicated to the reader? This inference arises because the poet shows a profound knowledge of an emotional state attributed to another person: such knowledge suggests that the one who makes the attribution is actually who experiences such emotions. The poet constructs an elaborate representation of Mr Bleaney's supposed emotional state, which is tantamount to saying *his own*. Although hypothetical, his analysis is thorough and merciless, and may be interpreted as an indirect confession: in this 'hired box,' he *occupies the place* of his predecessor in more than one sense.

3 Contrasting interpretations of the poem

Inferences drawn from the poem in the previous analysis lead to a 'pessimistic' interpretation. Schematically, my reading sees 'Mr Bleaney' as a *lamentation* of solitude, whereas Wayne Booth (2014) sees it as a *celebration*. I now compare both readings.

Even though a pessimistic/optimistic dichotomy may not allow for richer interpretations of the poem, it is useful to illustrate how relevance theory can be used to analyse readers' inferences, regardless of the resulting interpretations. Inferential analysis in relevance theory is not prescriptive: rather than establishing a set of rules for interpreting literary texts, it elucidates how, according to Wilson, 'linguistically encoded word meanings are adjusted (or "modulated") in use' (Wilson 2014: 139). In my case, this 'use' happens to be the interpretation of a poem.

In his biography about Larkin, Booth comments on 'Mr Bleaney.' Debating the view that the poem expresses Larkin's fears of becoming his character, he writes:

> …the poem is ambiguous. There is a certain exoneration in having only what one warrants in life, rather than being challenged by something 'better.' […] On one level, this sterile version of 'home,' a room without even 'room' for books, suits the poet perfectly. Crucially, its window offers a brief, beautiful epiphany: 'building land/ Tussocky, littered,' and 'the frigid wind/ Tousling the clouds.'
> (Booth 2014: 4455).

Booth finds an 'epiphany' in a fragment depicting the view from the window. The only emotional overtone is provided by connotations of 'littered' and 'frigid,' two hardly appealing qualities, one might think.

My analysis found nothing in the encoded meaning of the poem to support the view that the poet celebrates solitude. Nevertheless, I do think that there is ambivalence in the poet's description of his predecessor's monkish life and that Booth's interpretation would benefit from the kind of inferential analysis I exemplified.

Since Booth refers to 'a certain exoneration' in living a life like Bleaney's, an inferential analysis might start by exploring encyclopaedic associations of words used to describe such a life: 'habits' (l. 15), 'kept on' (l. 17), 'yearly frame' (l. 18) may be related to 'continuity,' 'predictability,' 'structure,' and similar concepts. Also, the explicit mention of Bleaney's habits emphasises such associations: his daily schedule, his food preferences, and his yearly vacation plans.

'Continuity,' 'predictability,' 'structure' are all rather *neutral* concepts, in that they do not evoke clearly pleasurable or painful associations. I think this neutrality is the key to explain interpretative divergence in the dichotomic terms I suggested. Whereas a 'pessimistic' interpretation sees such concepts as negative or neutral, an 'optimistic' one sees them as positive. The concept of 'routine' is the crossroads at

which one path must be followed instead of the other. On the one hand, routine may evoke 'monotony' and even 'boredom;' on the other, it may evoke 'stability,' 'constancy,' 'serenity.'

It should be noted that the path taken by the reader at this crossroads may depend partly on her emotional disposition at the moment of reading, rather than on any conscious election of a set of premises logically leading to a set of conclusions. Nevertheless, even if we cannot predict the path the reader will follow we can describe and understand it, once it has been taken. Inferential analysis is useful to describe and analyse both interpretative trajectories.

Conclusions

In this presentation, I used relevance theory to analyse Philip Larkin's 'Mr Bleaney.' Specifically, I identified inferences that may be drawn from its semantic content to construct a global interpretation that favours the idea that, by projecting himself upon a stranger, the poet expresses his existential fears and a pessimistic view of solitude. By contrasting my interpretation with Booth's (2014), I argue that inferential analysis based on relevance theory may help elucidate these interpretations.

The possibility of explaining how a poem may give rise to differing interpretations may become a firm first step towards a better understanding of polysemy and ambiguity in poetry. Literary criticism might benefit from inferential analysis to build a common ground for the discussion of dissenting readings of the same poetic work. With proper adjustment, this kind of analysis may also be helpful in other literary genres.

My analysis stops when the discussion enters the domain of the affective, which is an important dimension of a reader's response to a poem. Indeed, there is a point where emotional responses come into play and affect literary interpretation in ways that can hardly be anticipated. The interaction between emotional aspects and conceptual content is essential to define literature, as argued, among others, by Kolaiti: 'conceptual effects in art are just part of a bigger picture whose ultimate end is aesthetic experience' (Kolaiti 2009: 182).

While inferential analysis does not allow us to analyse emotional responses, it can be used to detect where and how emotions influence our interpretation. Applying relevance theory to literature offers a way to give subjectivity and emotion a proper place in literary interpretation: discussions between dissenting critics may be more productive if they acknowledge how emotions determine their reading, where cognition stops being predominant and where their discussion runs the risk of becoming a confrontation between subjectivities.

Notes

[1]An encyclopaedic entry, in relevance theory, 'contains information about its extension and/or denotation: the objects, events and/or properties which instantiate it. For example, the encyclopaedic entry for the concept *Napoleon* would contain a set of assumptions about Napoleon, the encyclopaedic entry for the concept *cat* would contain a set of assumptions about cats, and the encyclopaedic entry for the concept *argue* would contain a set of assumptions about arguing.' (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 87)

[2] '…humans are disposed to develop stereotypical assumptions and expectations about frequently encountered objects and events. For example, I have an idea of a typical pet, which includes dogs and cats but excludes elephants and spiders. It is thought that these schematic assumptions and expectations are stored and accessed as a unit or "chunk", that they are highly accessible, and that they will be used in default of any more specific information in processing utterances about the associated objects or events. Thus, when I hear that my neighbour has bought a pet, I will assume that it is something like a dog or a cat rather than an elephant or a spider, unless given specific information to the contrary' (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 88).

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