

The Language of Landscapes

University of Genoa

Conference Proceedings 2010

Characterisation and Text-worlds in *House of Sand and Fog*

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Introduction

A growing number of English texts use foreign language or alternate syntax construction to represent immigrants (e.g. work by Sandra Cisneros or Maxine Hong Kingston). Despite research into language ideology (see Lippi-Green, 1997) and immigrant representation in the press (see Baker et. al, 2008), immigrant representation in English literature has not been researched extensively in the field of stylistics. Some examples of the little research that has been conducted are Cortés-Conde and Boxer's (2002) article on linguistic manifestations of bilingual identity in the literary narratives of *Woman Hollering Creek* by Sandra Cisneros (1991), Albakry and Hunter Hancock' (2008) article on the use of Arabic code-switching in the novel *The Map of Love* by Adhaf Soueif (1999), Lambert (2008) on the representation of Maori speech in *Once Were Warriors* (1990) and Moyna (2008) on the portrayal of Spanish in *The Squatter and the Don* (1885). These articles focus almost exclusively on foreign language representation and less on the effects on the readers of the texts.

In this paper I will conduct a stylistic analysis of *House of Sand and Fog* by Andre Dubus III (1999) to investigate foreign language and alternate syntax in literature. My aim is, firstly, to research how foreign language and alternate syntax contributes to characterisation. Secondly, I will investigate the effect this has on readers; e.g. how might readers process and interpret the use of foreign language and/or alternate syntax in a narrative, and how does this affect their mental representations of characters? I will use Text World Theory (see, for example, Cruickshank and Lahey, 2010; Gavins, 2003, 2005, 2007; Lahey, 2006; Werth 1994, 1995, 1999) as my method for analysis, since this is a cognitive theory that is focussed on the reader. Thirdly, because Werth claimed that Text World Theory can account for all types of discourse (see Werth 1999: 85), I would like to examine how Text World Theory is able to cope with the particular narrative used for analysis. In more specific terms, I would like to investigate whether and how Text World Theory manages to take into account the practice of foreign language or alternate syntax construction to represent immigrants. I will continue this essay by first summarising the main tenets of Text World Theory. Then I will provide a context and summary of *House of Sand and Fog*, followed by my analysis of the novel. In the conclusion I will provide a summary of my analysis, and make suggestions to Text World Theory.

Methodology

Text World Theory was originally developed by Paul Werth (Werth, 1994; 1995; 1999). After his death the theory has been further augmented by a number of different scholars (see for example Gavins, 2000; 2003; 2005; 2007; Hidalgo-Downing, 2000; and Lahey, 2003). Text World Theory is based on the premise that all linguistically competent human beings construct mental representations, or text-worlds (Gavins, 2007: 2; Werth 1999: 7) in their minds to process language. The notion of mental representations in processing language is not novel (see for example Emmott, 1997 on Contextual Frames; Fauconnier, 1985 on mental spaces; and Johnson-Laird, 1983 on mental models). What

sets Text World Theory apart from other cognitive-linguistic frameworks is its experientialist approach, which means that Text World Theory aims to provide a framework for the study of discourse that takes both text and context into account (Werth, 1999: 17, 22; Gavins, 2007: 8). Text World Theory seeks to achieve this by separating every discourse into a number of distinct conceptual levels (Gavins, 2007: 8-9).

Within Text World Theory there are three conceptual levels, or types of worlds; the discourse world, the text-world, and modal-worlds (Gavins, 2007: 9-10). The discourse-world is concerned with 'the immediate situation which surrounds human beings as they communicate with one another' (Gavins, 2007: 9). Apart from the participants in the discourse and their immediate surroundings, the discourse world also contains the personal and cultural knowledge of those participants (Gavins, 2007: 9-10). However, only the necessary context information is used by the participants as they process the discourse. This 'agreed set of facts' is the *common ground* participants construct between themselves during the discourse (Stockwell, 2002: 136; Werth, 1999: 117).

The text-world is the mental representation of the discourse in the minds of the participants. By use of deictic and referential terms including properties, relations, tense and aspect, world-building elements provide the spatial and temporal boundaries of the text-world (Gavins, 2007: 36-37). World-switches occur when the spatio-temporal boundaries of a text-world shift (Gavins, 2007: 48; 54). Direct speech and direct thought also cause world-switches, because 'they alter the temporal parameters of the text-world by introducing present-tense discourse into a past-tense narrative' (Gavins, 2003: 131).

Text World Theory also accounts for modal-worlds. There are three kinds of modal-worlds; the boulomaic modal-world, the deontic modal-world and the epistemic modal-world. Boulomaic modal-worlds are worlds of wants, wishes and desire (Gavins, 2007: 94). Deontic modal-worlds are worlds of obligation and triggered by words or phrases expressing obligation (Gavins, 2007: 99). Epistemic modal-worlds are worlds of

knowledge and belief through which discourse participants can express varying degrees of certainty in the truth of a particular subject or proposition (Gavins, 2007: 110; Werth, 1999: 188; 239). Hypotheticals and indirect thought and indirect speech create epistemic worlds too (Gavins, 2007: 110). Focalised narratives can furthermore also be regarded as modal-world forming, because in these narratives both world-builders and function-advancing elements are filtered through the perspective of one or more characters (Gavins, 2003: 131-132).

Context and Summary of *House of Sand and Fog*

House of Sand and Fog is a novel by American author Andre Dubus III, and was originally published in 1999 by Random House. The novel was immediately a success, especially in the United States of America. It became a national bestseller, was selected for Oprah's Book Club in 2000, and was a finalist for the National Book Award for Fiction.

In *House of Sand and Fog* the lives of three characters are narrated. The first narrative in the novel is that of Colonel Behrani, who used to be a colonel in Iran before he fled to America. Behrani is now an immigrant struggling to get by. The second narrative is that of Kathy Nicolo, a former drug addict who is trying to get over the fact that her husband abandoned her. The third narrative is that of Lester Burdon, a police sheriff who falls in love with Kathy and leaves his family for her.

The narratives of the three characters are linked, as Behrani purchases an auctioned house from the county that belongs to Kathy Nicolo, who has wrongfully been evicted from it. He however does not want to sell it back to the government for the original price. He legally possesses the house, and therefore Kathy Nicolo cannot do anything but sue the government, for which she does not have enough money, or ask for another house of the same price, which she does not want to do. Police sheriff Lester Burdon, who provides the third narrative in the novel, helped Kathy move out when she was evicted, which led to the onset of their relationship.

Analysis

House of Sand and Fog is divided into two parts. The first part contains only the narratives of Colonel Behrani and Kathy Nicolo. The second part also contains the narrative of Lester Burdon. Interestingly, whereas the narratives of Colonel Behrani and Kathy Nicolo are written in the first person, the narrative of Lester Burdon is third person narration. Because the reader is presented with Lester Burdon's perspective relatively late and because his narrative is written in the third-person, it is possible that readers will feel further removed from Lester Burdon than from the other characters. However, the narrative of Lester Burdon is focalised through his perspective. In terms of Text-world Theory, this means that the narratives of Lester Burdon, Colonel Behrani and Kathy Nicolo are all modal-world forming instead of text-world forming, since the world-building and function-advancing elements are filtered through their perspective (Gavins, 2003: 132).

The narrators relate the events in a chronological order; where one narrator stops, the other continues. This is an example of variable internal focalization, which denotes that the focal point shifts from character to character while the narrative develops (Genette, 1980: 189-190). Characters do look back at the same event multiple times, which means that the same event may be evoked several times in accordance with the point of view of several characters.

Interestingly, readers are introduced to Colonel Behrani as a foreigner from the beginning of *House of Sand and Fog*. On the first page of the novel it is already stated that he is called camel because he is a Persian and can bear the sun longer than any of his colleagues (Dubus III, 1999: 15). The fact that he is a foreigner is further emphasised throughout the novel in several ways.

Firstly, it is stressed that he is foreign by the stories he tells himself. He describes his new life in the United States, which he compares to his past life in Iran. Also his

reflections on how he thinks others see him and his repeated assertions of him being a natural citizen emphasise the fact that he is foreign. Secondly, other major characters in *House of Sand and Fog* mispronounce Colonel Behrani's name and have trouble remembering it (Dubus III, 1999: 89; 95; 103). Thirdly, Colonel Behrani's wife has been described as 'having a thick accent' and her direct speech indicates that she is a non-native speaker of English as well (Dubus III, 1999: 74-75; 185). An example of this is 'I carry you tea and sugar you must for rest' (Dubus III, 1999: 75). Finally, the manner of speaking of Colonel Behrani is deviating from more standardised forms of English. He uses alternate syntax and foreign words in his narrative. This can be demonstrated in the following passage:

1 I drive northward upon the Bayshore Freeway. I make loose the tie at my neck
2 and I am thinking and feeling many things. Among those law enforcement officers
3 in that very orderly building, I felt in the manner one does when meeting a distant
4 cousin and seeing one's own brother or sister in the face of that cousin; even if
5 you have never before met this relative, there is the urge to embrace him simply
6 because you share a measure of the same blood. That is how I instantly felt
7 among all those uniformed men. And I begin to question my desire to find work
8 only with aerospace companies. Perhaps, after selling the bungalow and while
9 searching for the prudent investment opportunity, I might attempt finding a
10 position with a local police department. Chera na? Why not? I am a natural citizen

(Dubus III, 1999: 185).

This passage is interesting in a number of different ways. It is first of all interesting for its syntax construction and use of foreign language. I would argue that the first part of the second sentence 'I make loose the tie at my neck' is not a common sentence in Standard English, and an indicator that the speaker could be a non-native speaker of

English. Native speakers of English are probably more likely to say 'loosen' instead of 'make loose'. Behrani also code-switches when he uses 'Chera na' meaning 'Why not?' (Dubus III, 1999: 185).

Code-switching is the shifting between one variety, dialect or language and another (Wales, 2001: 63). However, whereas some scholars use the term code-switching for all changes in variety, dialect or language (e.g. Hymes, 1974: 103), others distinguish between code-switching and code-mixing (e.g. Amuda, 1989; Atoye, 1994; Bokamba, 1989; Bell, 1976). Code-mixing can be defined as 'the change of one language to another within the same utterance or within the same oral/written text' (Woon Yee Hoo, 2007). This would mean that Colonel Behrani code-mixes instead of code-switches, because in his narrative he switches frequently between English and Farsi. Hudson explains that code-mixing seems to symbolise a somewhat ambiguous situation in which 'neither language on its own would be quite right' (Hudson, 1996: 53).

In the case of Colonel Behrani, the mixture of English and Farsi is a reflection of his mind style (see, for example Fowler, 1977; 1996; Palmer, 2004; Semino, 1997; 2008). Although Behrani continuously asserts that he is an American citizen, his mind style represents him as a foreigner. Wales notes that code-switching in literary texts 'provides an interesting field for analysis, both in terms of its possible reflection on social reality and its manipulation as a literary device' (Wales, 2001: 63). The effect of code-switching or code-mixing in literature on the reader is unknown. Little work has been published on the effects code-switching has on the reader of literary texts that employ it. Most research relating to code-switching and literary texts is concerned with varieties of code-switching strategies authors employ in their work, rather than what effect it has on the reader (e.g. Albakry and Hancock, 2008; Lourdes, 2007).

House of Sand and Fog has been written in English an American bestseller. It is therefore reasonable to assume that most of Dubus III's intended readers are Americans, or at least mainly Western Citizens. Since readers bring their own cultural background and knowledge to a text, this will influence their perception of Colonel Behrani (see

Gavins, 2007: 9-10; Stockwell, 2002: 136; and Werth, 1999: 117). American Readers are less likely to be familiar with the Persian language and culture. Dubus III in this way creates the readers' view of what the Persian culture is like.

Dubus III's use of code-mixing and alternate syntax in the thought of a character might thus be employed to create an alienating effect on the reader. The reader is 'forced to listen to a foreign voice', will feel further removed from the specific character because he/she does not know the language used, and is unfamiliar with the character's cultural background (Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 2002: 149). I would argue that Dubus III employs code-mixing as a character identity creating strategy. Colonel Behrani's main characteristic is the fact that he is a foreigner, and the language use of Colonel Behrani thus creates and simultaneously continuously emphasises his identity.

Because Werth claimed that Text World Theory can account for the cognitive processes underlying all types of discourse (see Werth 1999: 85), it is interesting to investigate how the theory might account for the use of foreign language and/or alternate syntax in this passage. It is unlikely that the use of foreign language in a text creates a world-switch because there is no change in temporal or locational adverbs, nor are there any modal words present that might create a switch. It could be that the use of foreign language has no cognitive effect on the reader at all, simply because they are not familiar with it and because the English translation is often immediately given afterwards. The foreign text would then be left unprocessed. I would argue that in that case, code-mixing can be treated as only a graphological deviation, present to emphasise the foreignness of Colonel Behrani.

Werth discusses the novel *The Sound and the Fury* by Faulkner in one of his works (1999: 333). He argues that the first person narratives of Benjy, Quentin and Jason can be seen as 'three separate text-worlds, representing a set of overlapping circumstances' (Werth, 1999: 333). He furthermore states that the 'details of characterisation' within each text-world perform a world-building function, and that the events taking place can be seen as function-advancing (Werth, 1999: 333). Werth's analysis of *The Sound and*

the Fury can be compared to *House of Sand and Fog*, since both have focalised narratives.

Based on Werth's analysis, I would argue that the use of foreign language in Dubus III *House of Sand and Fog* is part of the 'details of characterisation', and therefore perform a world-building function. The use of foreign language then does not create a world-switch, but adds to the construction of the worlds of Colonel Behrani. It could even be classified as a part of the mental cognition processes of Colonel Behrani (involving aspects of thought and recognition; see Gavins, 2007: 85). This is part of systemic functional grammar used by Gavins in her explanation of the creation of text-worlds (Gavins, 2007: 62). Gavins bases her account on Halliday's work (1985). The function of the syntax would be to show the mental processes of a non-native speaker of English. So even though there is no description of the character given, I would argue that the use of foreign language and alternate syntax is person-advancing (Werth, 1999: 191), adding to the construction of the worlds of Colonel Behrani.

The passage I quoted earlier in this paper is furthermore interesting for its use of modality. First of all, because it is a focalised narration, the reader will need the narrator for their access to the narrative, since the narrator filters both world-building and function-advancing elements through his own perspective. For this reason the narrative can be seen to be modal-world forming. The main enactor in this passage is Colonel Behrani. In the first world a remote modal-world is set up when Colonel Behrani reports to be 'thinking and feeling many things', in which the character's words 'thinking' and 'feeling' indicate a more remote modal-world. The narrative then continues with what the narrator is thinking and feeling. He expresses his feelings in a series of possibilities and one negation, namely that of 'meeting a distant cousin and seeing one's own brother or sister in the face of that cousin', 'even if you have never before met this relative, there is the urge to embrace him simply because you share a measure of the same blood', which results in multiple shifts between modal-worlds (Dubus III, 1999: 185). With 'that is how

I felt' the narrator switches back to an earlier text-world. Figure 1 presents a schematic overview of the worlds of this part.

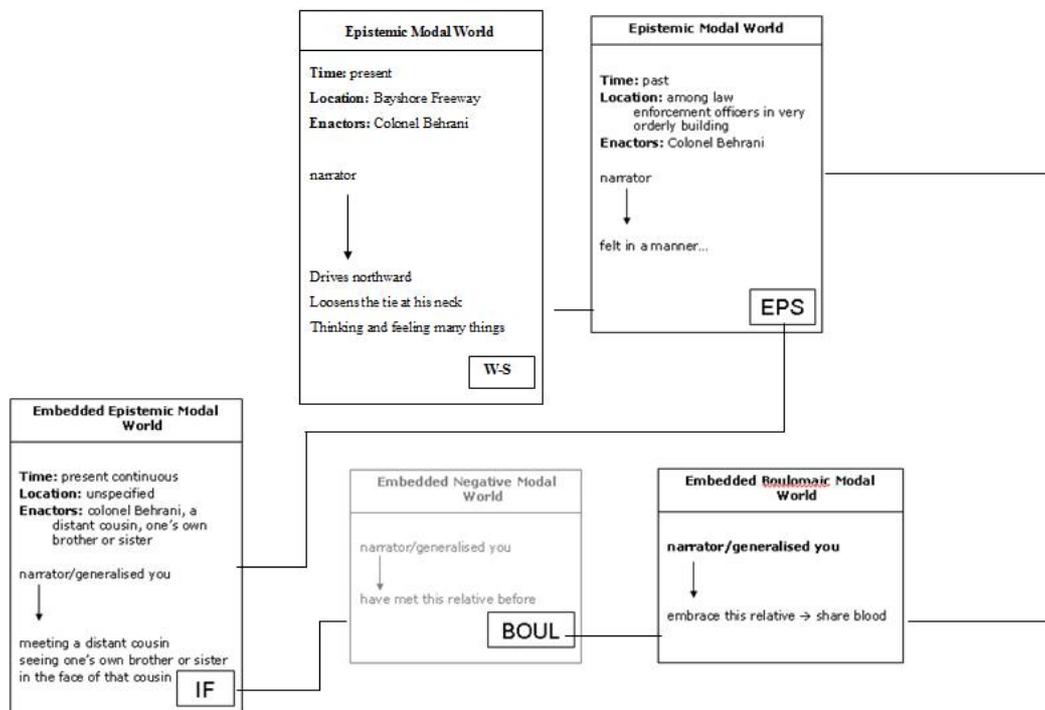


Fig. 1: Text-world structure of page 185 (Dubus III, 1999: 185).

In the part that follows, the narrator creates two-modal worlds, one embedded in the other, when he says 'and I begin to question my desire to find work only with aerospace companies'. The first modal-world created is an epistemic modal-world, concerned with knowledge and belief, triggered by his assertion of beginning to 'question' his desire. The second is a boulomaic world, concerned with wishes, wants and desires, in which the narrator desires to work only with aerospace companies. This modal-world is somewhat of an unstable world, since its status is being questioned by the narrator. The narrator again shifts to an epistemic world when he says 'perhaps, after selling the bungalow and while searching for the prudent investment opportunity, I might attempt finding a position with a local police department'. Words like 'perhaps' and 'might' are the world-builders for this modal-world (see also Gavins, 2003: 131).

I argued earlier that the use of foreign language can be seen as a person-advancing function because it emphasises the fact that Behrani is foreign. '[C]hera na'

and the translated 'why not?' are therefore not incorporated in any world. The last sentence is person-advancing as well, it describes Colonel Behrani. Figure 2 provides a schematic overview of these worlds, based on Gavins' models (Gavins, 2003: 135; 2007).

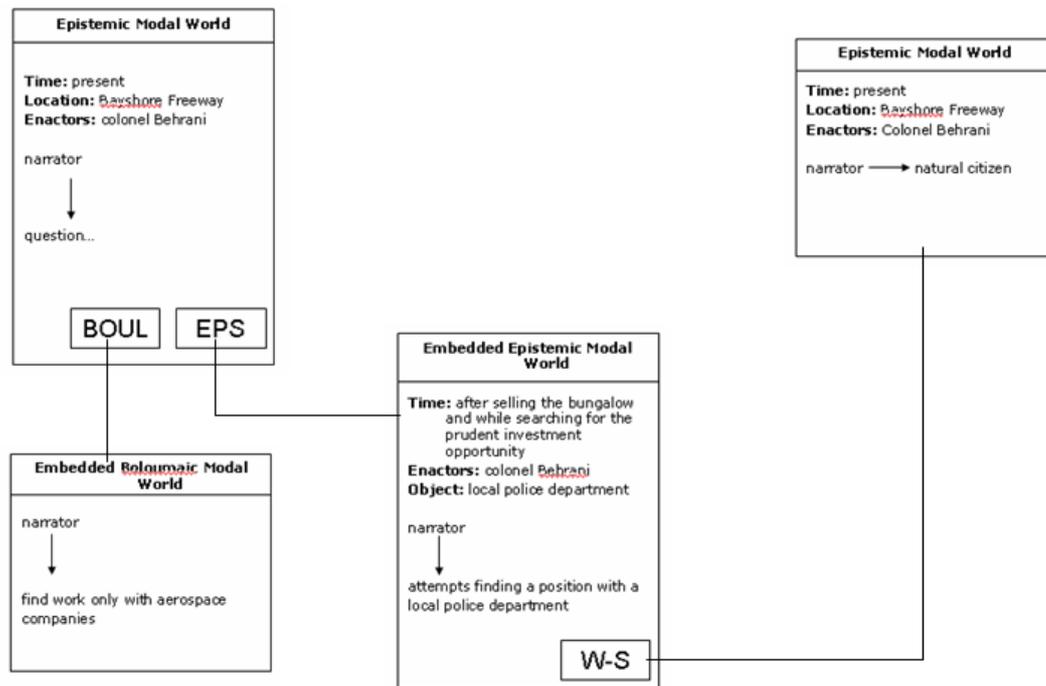


Fig. 2: Text-world structure of page 185 (Dubus III, 1999: 185).

My analysis of this excerpt of *House of Sand and Fog* shows how world-building and function-advancing elements in the narrative are filtered through the perspective of Colonel Behrani (Gavins, 2003: 132). His use of language can be seen as a reflection of his mental cognition processes. Firstly, his use of language indicates that he is a non-native speaker of English. Secondly, Colonel Behrani's mental cognition processes show that his mind is mainly occupied with unrealised states of affairs. Behrani's narrative is full of words marked for epistemic and boulomaic modality which express doubt and desire (about his future). I would argue that Colonel Behrani's foreignness and the high number of expressions of doubt and desire help to portray Colonel Behrani as an outsider, unassimilated in American society.

Conclusion

The aim of my analysis was to research how foreign language and alternate syntax contribute to characterisation. I have shown how these devices can be employed as a character identity creating strategy by arguing that Colonel Behrani's main characteristic is being a foreigner, and that the deviant language used by him therefore creates and simultaneously continuously emphasises his identity. Second, I attempted to investigate the effect of foreign language and alternate syntax on readers. This is near impossible without conducting experiments on actual readers. I therefore have only discussed how it could be accounted for in Text World Theory, and in doing so I also examined how Text World Theory was able to cope with the particular narrative used for my analysis. I have argued that the use of foreign language could be treated as solely emphasising the foreignness of Colonel Behrani, and therefore should be classified a person-advancing function within Text World Theory. In my examination of the use of modality in the passage, I demonstrated how Text World Theory is particularly well-equipped to explain this, and I argued that Colonel Behrani's foreignness and use of expressions marked for epistemic and boulomaic modality add in constructing him as a foreigner and an outsider, unassimilated in American society.

Acknowledgements

This paper is a revised version of an M.A. paper written for a Literary Linguistics module at the University of Nottingham. The original version was written under the supervision of Prof. Peter Stockwell. This paper is still a work in progress, and was reviewed by Dr. Joanna Gavins and Dr. Emma Moore.

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