

Parentheticals and Shifts in Point of View in Virginia Woolf's Novels

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Abstract: As a pioneer of Modernist writing, Virginia Woolf develops a unique way of presenting narrative viewpoints. In her novels, point of view shifts frequently from one character to another, and shifts in point of view can occur even within a single sentence. Such a radical narrative technique poses a great challenge to many readers, yet at the same time enriches the meaning of her writing. Although the complexity of viewpoint presentation exhibited in Woolf's novels has been noted by many literary critics, there are a limited number of theoretical accounts for a detailed exploration of the linguistic mechanism that realises the complicated arrangement of viewpoints. This article examines a particular linguistic construction used in *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*: parentheticals. A parenthetical is integrated into the linear structure of a clause, but displays syntactic independence from it. This syntactic freedom allows parentheticals to digress from the host clauses. It is the digressive nature of parentheticals that makes this linguistic construction a convenient device for Virginia Woolf to mingle different points of view. This article investigates both parentheticals that form part of the presented consciousness and those that function to specify the source of the presented consciousness. Furthermore, it will try to relate the linguistic form exhibited in Woolf's text with the notions of modernist writing.

Keywords: consciousness; point of view; shift; parenthetical; Virginia Woolf

1. Introduction

It has been noted by many literary critics that the presentation of point of view has great significance to Virginia Woolf's novels. When commenting on the novel *To the Lighthouse*, Adolphs and Carter describe it as 'a novel which is particularly interesting in terms of the linguistic representation of the characters' points of view and their attitudes towards one another' (2002: 7). Lambert emphasises the importance of point of view presentation in *Mrs Dalloway*: 'not only does Woolf's use of point of view affect tone, pace and character (as it would indeed for any novel), her point of view also affects the entire foundation and structure of the novel' (2011: 1). It is not exaggerated to say that point of view presentation is an essential contributor to the success of Virginia Woolf's works.

The uniqueness of Virginia Woolf's manipulation of point of view lies in the fact that multiple viewpoints are presented and that there are frequent shifts between these different viewpoints within short stretches of text. The earliest comment on the complexity of viewpoint presentation in Virginia Woolf's writing can be found in Auerbach (2003[1953]), who names Woolf's technique 'multipersonal representation of consciousness'. He states:

the essential characteristic of the technique represented by Virginia Woolf is that we are given not merely one person whose consciousness is rendered, but many persons, with frequent shift from one to another' (Auerbach, 2003[1953]: 536).

Later, Leaska (1972) also points out Virginia Woolf's accomplishment in her innovative handling of point of view. He gives an accurate description of the complexity of viewpoint in *To the Lighthouse*:

In this manifold stream-of-consciousness novel, there may be as many as four or five shifts of point of view within a single sentence; and precisely where the shift occurs is often not easy to determine. Moreover, there are occasional passages which are presented simultaneously from more than one point of view—that is, the passage may be shared simultaneously by two or more of the narrators; or the material may be presented in such a way as to make it impossible to distinguish between the omniscient narrator and the perceiving consciousness of a character. (Leaska, 1970: 20-21)

With such a way of mingling various viewpoints, the dividing line between them has been blurred so that various points of view are brought closer to one another and a new relation is created between them. Presenting more than one point of view is not exclusive to Virginia Woolf's writing; it is her radical way of combining multiple viewpoints that makes her method of viewpoint presentation special.

Although the complexity of viewpoint presentation exhibited in Woolf's novels and the significance of this writing method have been generally acknowledged, there is a relatively limited number of theoretical accounts providing a comprehensive and systematic exploration of the linguistic mechanism that realises the complicated arrangement of viewpoints in Woolf's texts. Leaska has pointed out the lack of linguistic investigation:

no single study offers a systematic or comprehensive method of analysis for determining how the manipulation of, and the stylistics associated with, multiple points of view function rhetorically to clarify the meaning of a work. (1970: 19)

In his book, Leaska (1970) sets off to fill in this theoretical blank by examining the presentation of the multiplicity of viewpoints in *To the Lighthouse*. However, he

approaches the manifold consciousnesses by isolating the point of view of different characters and studying them separately. He compares different language aspects associated with each of the characters: the mean sentence length, the degree of complexity of the sentence structure (clausal components and clause embedding), lexical choices (Latinate words or other words, content words or function words), verb density (the use of participles, gerunds and infinitives), the use of personal pronouns and abstract terms. Leaska provides detailed analysis as to what stylistic characteristics differentiate the viewpoint of different characters, but his approach just misses the significance of Woolf's special manipulation of viewpoints. The importance of multiplicity resides more in the connection and interaction of various points of view than in the fact that more than one individual viewpoint is presented, and it is precisely the connections and interactions of multiple points of view that are still waiting for investigation and explanations.

After Leaska (1970) has stated the lack of linguistic investigation for Woolf's special narrative technique, Torsello points out the same issue again about two decades later:

What has not yet been explained is just what it is, linguistically, that Woolf does in her text which results in the subtle shifts in point of view perceived by the reader. (1991: 159)

In recent years, there has been increasing amount of research devoted to exploring the linguistic makings for the presentation of multiple points of view. For example, Sotirova (2007, 2013) has provided inspiring analyses of Woolf's novels. According to her, Virginia Woolf portrays individual minds as engaging in dialogical interactions with each other. In her analysis, she has isolated several linguistic features that indicate such dialogical links, including the use of sentence-initial connectives, the use of

cohesive devices such as substitution and repetition, and the anaphoric use of demonstrative pronouns. Apart from the linguistic devices isolated by Sotirova in connection with the shifts of viewpoints, there are still more to explore. To fill in this research gap, this article will examine a particular linguistic construction employed in *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*: parentheticals. A parenthetical is often disposed of as a secondary, insignificant element, a mere digression from the main discourse. However, as the following analysis will show, this construction is one important means by which Woolf presents multiple points of view and creates the special interaction between various sources of consciousness.

When investigating the use of parentheticals in Free Indirect Style, Blakemore provides an excellent summary of the function of this construction in relation to the presentation of narrative point of view:

a represented thought may be interrupted by a parenthetical in which the narrator attributes the source of the represented thought. [...] there are also other types of pragmatically integrated parentheticals which interrupt a passage of represented thought but which seem to reflect the narrator's consciousness rather than that of the character whose thoughts are being represented. There are also parentheticals which are part of a represented thought but which interrupt a passage of description in the narrator's own voice. And there are parentheticals which interrupt a passage of represented thought but which seem to reflect the consciousness of another character. (2009: 134)

This summary indicates the potential of parentheticals to mingle different viewpoints. However, Blakemore's focus is placed on how this linguistic construction can be used by an author to achieve the optimal relevance by creating a sense of mutuality between

the reader and the character, and between the reader and the author; it is not her research aim to examine how parentheticals function in a particular text and what stylistic significance such a construction can have particularly with respect to the changes in narrative viewpoints. This is exactly what this article will turn to investigate.

2. Parentheticals: definition, linguistic features and functions

Most definitions of parentheticals emphasise that this construction displays syntactic independence from the host structure. In other words, a parenthetical does not play any syntactic role in the structure of the host clause. For example, Biber et al. define a parenthetical as:

an interpolated structure [...] a digressive structure [...] which is inserted in the middle of another structure, and which is unintegrated in the sense that it could be omitted without affecting the rest of that structure or its meaning. (1999: 1067)

Similarly, Dehé and Kavalova offer the following definition:

parentheticals are expressions that are linearly represented in a given string of utterance (a host sentence), but seem structurally independent at the same time. (2007:1)

From the above definitions, it can be seen that the syntactic independence of parentheticals has been unanimously acknowledged. However, since a parenthetical does not play any syntactic role in the whole sentence construction, a question remains as to why it still appears in the linear structure. Sometimes, this is explained as a result of the speaker's lack of time for organising his or her sentences under the speech situation, but this cannot explain why parentheticals also occur in written discourse as

people usually have plenty of time to arrange and revise their sentences. Some linguists argue that the use of parentheticals has pragmatic significance: parentheticals can facilitate listeners/ readers to recover the meaning of the speaker/ writer with the least processing effort (see Blakemore, 2005; 2009). For example:

- (1) A helicopter, a HELICOPTER—and here was me who'd never even flown in an ordinary plane—would come and pick me up at... (from *Stargazing: memoirs of a young lighthouse keeper*, by Peter Hill, abridged by Laurence Waring, read for Radio 4 by David Tennant; quoted from Blakemore, 2005: 1166)

At the beginning of this sentence, the noun phrase *a helicopter* is too general for the listener to understand the meaning the speaker intends to express. Adding the parenthetical immediately after the noun phrase specifies what a helicopter means to the speaker and thus guides the interpretation of the sentence. In this way, the parenthetical and its host make a collective contribution in communicating the speaker's meaning.

Furthermore, apart from performing the basic pragmatic function, Blakemore (2005) argues that parentheticals can also produce stylistic effects. In the above example, the speaker is expressing his excitement when he learns from a letter that he will be picked up by a helicopter. According to Blakemore, the parenthetical creates 'the impression that the reader/hearer is reading—and processing—the letter with the author and in this way sharing his excitement' (2005: 1176). Such a stylistic effect would be reduced if the parenthetical is not used. The insight that the use of parentheticals is a deliberate stylistic choice made by the speaker/author is significant to the study of parentheticals in literary language, a type of language marked by high stylistic salience. And as the

following analysis will show, the use of parentheticals produces special effects on the reader's interpretation of narrative point of view.

As is stated earlier in this section, a parenthetical does not play any syntactic role in the whole sentence construction. This syntactic independence allows a degree of freedom for parentheticals to digress from the host construction. Indeed, parentheticals are often considered as a digression or an aside from their host. For example, as is stated in the above definition, Biber et al. categorise a parenthetical as 'a digressive structure' (1999: 1067). Similarly, Adamson describes parentheticals as 'a particular transgressive construction', epitomising such qualities as 'topic shift, interrupted syntax, associative connections' (1998: 595-596). Also, Fludernik points out that parentheticals provide 'a second topic nucleus' (1993: 166). And this article will argue that Woolf draws on this digressive feature and uses parentheticals to insert a different narrative point of view.

3. Categorisation of parentheticals

Parentheticals are divided into two categories in this study. The first category is parentheticals that form part of the presented consciousness. These parentheticals are similar to those that are frequently seen in spoken discourse. They contribute to the content of the on-going discourse, adding more information or revising what has been said. These are called editing parentheticals in the current study. For example:

- (2) Lady Bradshaw (*poor goose—one didn't dislike her*) murmured how, "just as we were starting, my husband was called up on the telephone, a very sad case...." (*Mrs Dalloway*: 1992: 201; my emphasis, and it is the same with the following textual examples)

The italicised words in this example interrupt the on-going sentence and add more information to the character Lady Bradshaw.

The second category of parentheticals is different in that they mainly function to specify the source of the presented consciousness instead of forming part of it. These parentheticals help with the readers' attribution of narrative point of view. So they are called attributing parentheticals. For example:

- (3) "There's Peter Walsh!" *she said, shaking hands with that agreeable sinner, that very able fellow who should have made a name for himself but hadn't...* (*Mrs Dalloway*, 1992: 197)

An attributing parenthetical is similar to what is called *reporting clauses*, but in this study, an attributing parenthetical also includes any modifying constructions that can follow the reporting signal. In the above example, the participial clause is also part of the attributing parenthetical due to its syntactic relation to the preceding clause. Although editing parentheticals and attributing parentheticals function in different ways in the discourse of consciousness presentation, they both disrupt the flow of the sentence, which can potentially affect reader's perception of the narrative viewpoint. This is why this article discusses them together. In the following two sections, these two categories of parentheticals will be discussed respectively.

4. Editing parentheticals

In *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, editing parentheticals are often used to insert one character's speech or thought in the middle of the presentation of another character's consciousness. The following is an example:

(4) But he himself remained high on his rock, like a drowned sailor on a rock. I leant over the edge of the boat and fell down, he thought. I went under the sea. I have been dead, and yet am now alive, but let me rest still; he begged (*he was talking to himself again—it was awful, awful!*); and as, before waking, the voices of birds and the sound of wheels chime and chatter in a queer harmony, grow louder and louder and the sleeper feels himself drawing to the shores of life, so he felt himself drawing towards life, the sun growing hotter, cries sounding louder, something tremendous about to happen. (*Mrs Dalloway*, 1992: 75)

This extract presents a scene in which Septimus is sitting in Regent's Park when his wife Rezia comes towards him. The use of the third-person pronoun and the simple past tense in the first sentence and the latter half of the last one in this passage seem to suggest the mode of pure narration. However, what these sentence parts narrate is not what is really happening in the story; it is only Septimus's imagination. He is sitting on a chair in the park instead of a rock near the sea, and he did not die and come back to life again. The idiosyncratic reveries and the surreal scenes firmly anchor the text in Septimus's viewpoint. While readers are immersed in Septimus's consciousness, the editing parenthetical midway in this passage introduces a different voice. The most conventional way of using editing parentheticals is that the narrator adds more information about a focalised character, such as this character's appearance or action; an editing parenthetical can also insert the narratorial comment on a certain scene. However, the editing parenthetical in this example does not sound like the narrator's voice. Rather, the repetition of the emotive adjective *awful* and the exclamation establish Rezia's subjectivity. Therefore, instead of the narratorial intervention, this

editing parenthetical establishes a different character's point of view. The narrative viewpoint changes from Septimus to Rezia and back to him again. In this way, the parenthetical weaves two different viewpoints together. Besides, presenting both Septimus's consciousness and Rezia's in the same sentence increases the richness of the text: it complicates the narrative structure in terms of point of view; on the other hand, thematically, it sets the misery of the war veteran and the suffering of his wife in resonance.

The following is a similar example of using editing parentheticals to interweave different viewpoints:

- (5) "Oh, coffee!" said Mrs Ramsay. But it was much rather a question (*she was thoroughly roused, Lily could see, and talked very emphatically*) of real butter and clean milk. (*To the Lighthouse*, 1992: 112)

This extract is taken from the dinner scene: Mrs Ramsay is speaking to her guests about the English food. The first sentence presents her speech in the direct form, and the second sentence switches to the free indirect form. On the whole, the speech presentation aligns the text with Mrs Ramsay's point of view. Again, an editing parenthetical is used to insert a different source of consciousness. The attributing parenthetical *Lily could see* makes it explicit that the words in the editing parenthetical belong to Lily's thought. What is especially interesting in this example is that Lily's thought is inserted right in the middle of one of Mrs Ramsay's sentences, so readers have to readjust their attribution of viewpoint even without finishing a single sentence. This arrangement of narrative point of view produces a strong sense of simultaneity: the text presents Mrs Ramsay's subjectivity through her speech, and at the same time, it shows how her speech is perceived by other characters.

Example (4) and (5) have illustrated how editing parentheticals function in the text. Virginia Woolf draws on the digressive nature of parentheticals to insert one character's speech or thought in the middle of the presentation of another character's consciousness. In this way, two sources of consciousness are presented simultaneously. The next section will examine how attributing parentheticals are used in the text.

5. Attributing parentheticals

Attributing parentheticals are usually considered to be associated with the narrator's voice. According to Reinhart, an attributing parenthetical is 'an assertion of the speaker', conveying his or her 'interpretation, evaluation or description of the manner of the parenthetical-subject's speech act, which is represented in the main clause' (1975: 156, quoted from Banfield, 1982: 190). Falzon argues that an attributing parenthetical notifies the readers of the suspending or the ending of a character's speech and 'lead them back to the narrative of the story where the narrator can again take over the narration' (1996: 355). Semino and Short tag the attributing signals as Narrator's Report of Speech/Thought (2004: 30). Therefore, for these researchers, an attributing parenthetical indicates a shift of viewpoint from a character to the narrator. Banfield (1982) also holds the view that an attributing parenthetical can trigger a shift in narrative viewpoint, but for her, the shift is from one character to another. She provides a formal description for such use of attributing parentheticals:

Shift in point of view: SELF and NOW may change in referent in a sequence of Es when the new E is coreferential with a demonstrative in an argument (subject or object) of a verb of consciousness or communication. The new SELF is coreferential with the subject of the consciousness verb or the subject or indirect object of the communication verb. (1982: 102)

This description can be best illustrated with the following example:

- (6) 'I met Clarissa in the Park this morning,' *said Hugh Whitbread*, diving into the casserole, anxious to pay himself this little tribute, for he had only to come to London and he met everybody at once; but greedy, one of the greediest men she had ever known, *Milly Brush thought*, who observed men with unflinching rectitude, and was capable of everlasting devotion, to her own sex in particular, being knobbed, scraped, angular, and entirely without feminine charm. (*Mrs Dalloway*, 1992: 116-117)

In this example, according to Banfield, the words before the semicolon form one unit, which she calls an Expression. The attributing parenthetical *said Hugh Whitbread* determines that these words must be attributed to Hugh's viewpoint. The words after the semicolon form the second Expression. It is an instance of represented thought, which is coreferential with the demonstrative in the second attributing parenthetical: [*so/thus*] *Milly Brush thought*. The occurrence of the new attributing parenthetical triggers a shift of viewpoint from Hugh Whitbread to Milly Brush. Banfield does not explain why a single sentence should be treated as two separate units. In fact, what makes this example interesting is precisely that two attributing parentheticals are integrated within the same sentence. Banfield's treatment of this example seems rather reductive considering what effects such a complex sentence can have on the readers' interpretation of narrative point of view.

It is significant that Banfield points out the function of attributing parentheticals in triggering a shift of viewpoint from one character to another; however, she underestimates the complexity of the way in which attributing parentheticals function in Woolf's text. Besides, she leaves little space for the role of the context in affecting the

readers' attribution of narrative point of view. The extract below can show how an attributing parenthetical complicates the presentation of narrative viewpoints:

(7) Oh, that is Ellie Henderson," said Sally. Clarissa was really very hard on her.

She was a cousin, very poor. Clarissa was hard on people.

She was rather, said Peter. Yet, *said Sally, in her emotional way, with a rush of that enthusiasm which Peter used to love her for, yet dreaded a little now, so effusive she might become*—how generous to her friends Clarissa was!

(*Mrs Dalloway*, 1992: 209-210)

In this example, Peter Walsh and Sally Seton are talking about Clarissa at the party. The attributing parenthetical *said Sally* in the second paragraph specifies that the presented speech belongs to Sally. This attributing parenthetical contains some modifying constructions, including two prepositional phrases and a loosely connected clause. With a closer examination, it can be seen that the emphasising expression *a rush of that enthusiasm* points to Peter's subjectivity. Also, the verb phrases *used to love* and *dreaded a little now* align the text with Peter's viewpoint. The last clause *so effusive she might become* in fact is Peter's thought presented in the free indirect form. Thus this attributing parenthetical points to two sources of consciousness: it establishes Sally's point of view through the presentation of her speech; meanwhile, it conveys Peter's subjectivity through the modifying constructions following the attributing signal. Thus two sources of consciousness are presented at the same time.

The attributing parenthetical in the following example functions in a similar way:

(8) What damned rot they talk, *thought Charles Tansley, laying down his spoon precisely in the middle of his plate, which he had swept clean, as if, Lily thought* (he sat opposite to her with his back to the window precisely in the

middle of view), *he were determined to make sure of his meals*. Everything about him had that meagre fixity, that bare unloveliness. But nevertheless, the fact remained, it was impossible to dislike any one if one looked at them. She liked his eyes; they were blue, deep set, frightening. (*To the Lighthouse*, 1992: 93)

This extract is also taken from the dinner scene. The first clause is an instance of direct thought presentation. The attributing parenthetical *thought Charles Tansley* explicitly points out the source of the thought. The participial clause following the attributing signal can be seen as the narratorial description of this character, but since it is syntactically subordinated to the preceding clause, it can also be interpreted as sustaining Charles's point of view. However, as the sentence continues, another attributing parenthetical occurs, which makes it clear that Lily's point of view is involved. The narrative viewpoint stealthily changes from Charles Tansley to Lily Briscoe, but it is not easy to determine exactly which part of the sentence belongs to Charles and which part to Lily since all the words are syntactically integrated within the same sentence. The demarcation of the narrative viewpoint can no longer depend on the sentence boundaries. Just as Sotirova comments:

This swift reorientation of the perspectival focus is an emblematically Woolfian technique which demonstrates how an analysis seeking to confine each sentence to a single perspective falls short of paying Woolf's mastery of consciousness presentation its fair due. (2013: 138)

To sum up, Example (7) and (8) have illustrated that an attributing parenthetical can trigger a shift in viewpoint by inserting a different character's consciousness through the modifying constructions that are included in it. This device allows two distinct

narrative points of view to be accommodated within a single sentence. Again, such an arrangement of narrative viewpoints creates a sense of simultaneity, and also adds to the fluidity of the text. Two sources of consciousness are brought closer to one another.

6. Concluding remarks

This article has illustrated how both editing parentheticals and attributing parentheticals can complicate the presentation of narrative point of view. As the textual examples have shown, parentheticals function as an important means for Virginia Woolf to shift narrative viewpoint and mingle different sources of consciousness. Perceived as a digressive construction, parentheticals signal a change in the on-going discourse. However, instead of a change in topic, parentheticals in Woolf's text enact a change in narrative viewpoint. Nonetheless, the pragmatic feature of this construction prepares the readers for any changes in the narrative. In this way, although the shift in point of view is frequent and not easy to predict, it would not be unacceptable to the readers.

Yet one further question to ask is why Woolf arranges narrative points of view in such a way. In a letter to one of her friends, Virginia Woolf criticises the conventional method of writing:

In fact I rather think that you've broached some of the problems of the writer's too, who are trying to catch and consolidate and consummate (whatever the word is for making literature) those splashes of yours; for the falsity of the past (by which I mean Bennett, Galsworthy and so on) is precisely I think that they adhere to a formal railway line of sentence [...] (*Letters* 3: 135-36; my emphasis)

The use of parentheticals can be seen as an effective way to break the railway line of sentence. In fact, it not only interrupts the syntactic progression of the sentence, it also

subverts the presentation of unified coherent narrative point of view. Just as Adamson has remarked:

[...] novelists seem to have become discontented with the representation of a unified, developing consciousness which underlies the technique of empathetic narrative. Woolf and Lawrence, for instance, prefer to cut between different perspectives, often in successive sentences or clauses. (Adamson, 1998: 677)

The use of parentheticals to bring in multiple narrative viewpoints epitomises the modernist notion of what comprises a more appropriate narrative form suitable for the new period. Furthermore, it also indicates Woolf's idea about the nature of consciousness and the relation between individuals.

In his comment on *To the Lighthouse*, Leonard Woolf states that the multiple points of view method is adopted to produce 'the delicate art exploring human experience and human associations':

It seems to me impossible to read *To the Lighthouse* and not see that, beneath the surface of events and the kaleidoscope of thoughts and dialogue, the subject of the book, the pivot of the novel, is the most important and complex relations of human beings and the most profound problems of human existence (1970: 10-11)

The same could also be said of *Mrs Dalloway*. When writing *The hours*, which was about to become *Mrs Dalloway* later, Virginia Woolf described her design for the novel in her dairy:

I should say a good deal about *The Hours*, & my discovery; how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters; I think that gives exactly what I want;

humanity, humour, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect, & each comes to daylight at the present moment. (*Dairies*, II: 263)

To interpret this perhaps over-quoted passage, some critics have focused on how Virginia Woolf manages the time strata and loosens the tightness of the chronological structure (e.g. Gillies, 1996: 115; Prudente, 2009: 140). The caves behind the characters are the various moments of their life; the connection of the caves is realised through the mingling of these moments when one's present sensation sparks off past memories, when reflections on the past bring about fresh thoughts about the present. Apart from the treatment of time reflected in this dairy entry, other critics also discuss the metaphor of the connected caves in terms of Woolf's idea about relationships between individuals. According to Hague, Virginia Woolf is undertaking the task of 'rendering the covert connections among characters in an appropriate form', and this task makes her create this tunnelling technique (2003: 235).

The use of parentheticals allows multiple narrative viewpoints to be accommodated within a single sentence. In this way, different sources of consciousness are brought closer to one another. As Sotirova has argued, the constant shifting and cutting between different viewpoints seems to have rendered the boundaries between distinct consciousnesses permeable (2013: 154). Seen in this light, the interweaving viewpoints and the very fabric of the text become a symbol of the possible intersubjective connection.

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