

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 172 209

CS 204 860

AUTHOR Regnier, Paul J. P.
 TITLE Discourse Analysis and Literary Study.
 PUB DATE Mar 79
 NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Spring Meeting of the North-East Modern Language Association (Hartford, Connecticut, March 29-31, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Discourse Analysis; English Curriculum; Language Research; *Learning Processes; *Literary Analysis; *Literature

ABSTRACT Although both literary study and discourse analysis examine texts and oral discourses, literary study tends to emphasize the totality of the text while discourse analysis seeks to isolate manageable elements and structures to validate hypotheses about mental processes. Interaction has recently occurred between the two disciplines in "poetics," "structuralism," and the study of "story grammars." Discourse analysis can be useful in literary study, particularly in the analysis of literature's mostly unconscious "codes," the aspect of literature studied by the new "poetics." Discourse analysis delineates the structural elements and the relationships between them in various types of discourse. To judge the validity of a given discourse analysis theory, a discourse must be seen as a reaction to human experience, and analysis of discourse should be an attempt to explain the relationship between the discourse and the experience. The relationship is part of the continuum between actual world, experience, discourse, and analysis. As an application to the teaching of literature, a useful method might be one in which the teacher begins with showing the structure of "simple stories" and builds to more sophisticated texts, isolating elements to be taught. (DF)

 * Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
 * from the original document. *

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND LITERARY STUDY

Paul J.F. Regnier

Literary study is essentially different from disciplines which are, or pretend to be, scientific in method. The peculiar quality of humanistic disciplines such as literary study, philosophy, and history is their emphasis on the complexity, the interpenetration of concrete and abstract, and even the ultimate epistemological impenetrability of human experience. This is true of literary study because of the nature of its object. As Lionel Trilling has said:

"... literature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty"

On the other hand, disciplines using scientific methodology are necessarily reductive of human experience, since it is impossible to experiment with and to formulate general laws about the whole of human experience. Both literary study and "discourse analysis" study texts and oral discourses, but literary study tends to emphasize the totality of a text or discourse, while discourse analysis seeks to isolate manageable elements and structures of the text so that hypotheses about the mental processes involved in reading (or listening), remembering, and writing (or speaking) various kinds of discourses may be formulated and tested. The two disciplines, thus, approach a text or discourse with different goals, methods, and assumptions.

There is, and has been, however some intellectual crossover between the two disciplines (as shown, e.g., by the importance of Propp to discourse analysis and the Grammar of Stories of Gerald Prince - a literary theorist). This crossover is connected intellectually and, in some cases in the same person, with the new "Poetics" in literary theory and especially with "Structuralist" thinking. This paper will consider the value, and the limitations for literary study, of some of the concepts and techniques of discourse analysis.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Paul J.F. Regnier.

ED172209

35204 860

A work of literature is at the same time (at least) all of the following:

1. An irreducible "world" in itself. I use Michael McCannes' definition of "world" as, "an area with its own logically stipulated horizons, plus its own coherent concerns that fill out this area, define it, and thereby render it irreducible to any other 'world' likewise defined." ("The Literal and the Metaphorical: Dialectic or Interchange," PMLA, Vol. 91, No. 2, March, 1976, p. 282)
2. An organization which selects items from the world and orders them for a purpose. This purpose is often ambiguous and elusive and is probably seldom completely conscious on the part of the writer.
3. A product of innumerable (mostly unconscious) social, psychological, literary, linguistic, etc. codes.

The third of these aspects is potentially the most reducible and is that aspect of literature to which the new "Poetics" is devoted. The terms of this new Poetics have been variously described. Jonathan Culler points to Roland Barthes' definition of the task of Poetics as making, "explicit the underlying system which makes literary effects possible." (Structuralist Poetics, p. 118) Most literary theorists in this Structuralist mode concentrate on identifying the system or the series of codes within which literature operates rather than in explicitly defining a work of literature in terms of such a code. Even in S/Z, which is a sentence-by-sentence analysis, in terms of five "codes," of a particular literary text, Barthes continually points out that, "the meaning of a text can be nothing but the plurality of its system, its infinite (circular) 'transcribability': one system transcribes another, but reciprocally as well: with regard to the text, there is no 'primary' critical language." (Richard Miller's translation, p. 120). Notice, however, the emphasis on

the "plurality", indeed the "infinity" of codes and of aspects of meaning. This complexity of the text may be dismissed by some (especially by those who are not toward "literary study") as trivial or as an aspect only of "literariness". Indeed, most literary critics make a fairly sharp distinction between "literary" and "nonliterary" discourses (sometimes to the point of arguing about the "fictionality" -- meaning the "literariness" -- of nonfictional texts). (e.g., Burton Pike's article mentioned in my paper on literary nonfiction). I maintain that the meaning of every discourse is "infinitely transcribable" but that the conventions which govern each discourse limit the ways in which it does, in fact, mean. As Culler says, in Structuralist Poetics, we should, "reformulate as conventions of literature and operations of reading what others might think of as facts about various literary texts." (p. 128). What makes a discourse "literary" as well as what makes one "realistic" or "symbolic" are the conventions within which it is read or heard. Culler illustrates this by rewriting a short news story as a lyric poem. (Structuralist Poetics, p. 161) "Convention," as used here, is that expectation on the part of the receiver (which is assumed by the sender) about the kind of meaning he can expect from the discourse.

This expectation limits the codes which the receiver applies to the discourse, and, thus, limits the range of meaning derived from the discourse. Potentially, however, many more codes may be applied to a discourse than actually are. For instance, an "etymological" code could be applied to any discourse, adding resonance to every word, or all of the dead metaphors, with which English is so especially rife, could be called up. Or a shopping list could become a revelation about a particular domesticity or a paean to the kitchen or to the supermarket. The interpretation of a discourse -- whether "literary" or "nonliterary" -- involves, at least, the placing of the discourse's elements within the conventions by which the discourse is limited. Obviously, at least some of these conventions must be shared by the producer and the receiver of the discourse and most of these conventions are shared by the general society and/or by subgroups within the society. The (conventional)

purpose of the discourse limits the extent to which the plurality of the "codes" or systems of association are realized in the finally produced meaning.

A discourse designated "literature" operates within conventions, as does any discourse, but its conventions are less limiting and it is one of the conventions of literature that a particular example of it may more readily break the conventions limiting it, that, "literature continually undermines, parodies, and escapes anything which threatens to become a rigid code or explicit rules for interpretation." (Culler, Ferdinand de Saussure, Penguin, 1976, p. 114) The reason for this quality of literature goes back to item #2 on my list of what literature is. One of the purposes of every work of "literature" (and this applies to any discourse perceived within the general convention of "literature") is to "take account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty," as Trilling said.

Discourse analysis attempts to delineate the structural elements and the relationships among those elements in discourses of various kinds. It assumes that the conventions which govern discourses are discoverable, analyzable, and predictable. Hypotheses about these conventions and their interrelationships are subject to experiment. Most discourse "grammars" which have been promulgated have been grammars of narrative and most, if not all, of these have used "events" as their essential elements and some kind of "plot structure" as the essential relationship among the elements. As Barbara Leondar says, however, "Whatever the variations of content, style, and diction--and these often seem to vary widely--the underlying plot structure evinces a shared set of relations" (Perkins and Leondar, p. 189). The obvious question, to the literary theorist, is: "What about the 'content, style, and diction,' not to mention the themes and tropes and ironies and rhythms and myths?" The discourse analyst might answer that one cannot run experiments on the effect of all of those things on the reception or production of a discourse, and that may be true. Which brings us back to the differences between humanistic and scientific approaches to discourse and to Trilling's comment about the nature of literature.

To the extent to which a "story grammar" defines the basic plot structure of a type of discourse, it sets a basis against and around which other "codes" can be seen to operate. As I indicated earlier, however, it is at best an open question whether plot structure - or any other particular structure - ought to be seen as the "basic" code of a discourse. Presently, it appears that discourse analysts and other story grammarians (e.g., Prince, Todorov) have yet to find an hypothesis which will adequately explain what is being defined, what its elements are, and the necessary structures of those elements for comprehension and production. A "simple story" is variously defined, usually by the number, type, and order of events in it, but, for instance, by Mandler and Johnson, "by the fact that it has a single protagonist in each episode" (p. 114). The type and order of events in a story are varied in recall experiments to show that certain structures make stories easier to recall and, generally, that the structure of events, rather than, for instance, their nomenclature or meaning, govern stories' abilities to be remembered. The "meaning" of a narrative is reduced to a summary of events and their structure and other elements are relegated to the limits of "surface details" so that Kintsch and van Dyk can talk of, "increasing the complexity of the surface form while leaving the underlying meaning intact," (Kintsch and van Dyk, p. 371) and Rumelhart feels that, "it is possible to pick out what is important in connected discourse and summarize it without seriously altering the meaning of the discourse." (Rumelhart, p. 226)

The reductiveness of this type of analysis is obvious. It ignores the fact that a discourse is a product of, "a language and a world full of ambiguity and uncertainty" (Collins, Warnock, etc. in Bobrow and Collins, p. 383). Nevertheless, it may tell us something about how one aspect of discourse is comprehended. It seems especially applicable to stories from oral cultures, and one would like to see some comparison, for instance, between "story grammar" models and the descriptions of "oral performance" in A.B. Lord's The Singer of Tales. At the same time, stories from oral cultures can be mutilated by this model of plot summary. The most obvious example in the discourse

analysis literature is the use of the North American folk-tale "The War of the Ghosts" originally cited by F.C. Bartlett. Bartlett used this story for some of his earliest experiments because it comes from a culture, "exceedingly different from those of my subjects," and he wanted, "to see how educated and rather sophisticated subjects would deal with (its) lack of obvious rational order." (p. 69) I am handing out a copy of this story for those who are unfamiliar with it. Bartlett found that his subjects (literate and with Western educations) tended to eliminate supernatural elements and to add details not present in the original setting in order to "satisfyingly" deal with the material. Mandler and Johnson agree with Bartlett that the story is "ill-formed," though they admit that, "some of its obscurity derives from the conventions familiar to its intended audience but foreign to our culture." (p. 135) Its relationship to the culture of its derivation is, however, somewhat obscure. It may be that the "events" of the story would be more causally related to the culture of its origin, but, in any case, what makes the story "interesting" to me is the extent to which it violates expectations of causal relationships. In many cases, it might be these violations which one would remember about it. (just as the reiterated causal relationship between the events in "The Old Farmer and His Stubborn Animals" [Thorndyke, pp. 105-106] is memorable.) Bartlett refers to these violations as aspects of "style" and concludes that, "style seems to be one of those factors which are extremely readily responded to, but extremely rarely reproduced with any fidelity." (Bartlett p. 81) This apparent importance of the causal structure of events and apparent lack of importance of other elements to the recall of stories establishes the bias of discourse analysis. But one might question experiments using stories from oral cultures on subjects who are educated in reading cultures in which one may go back to a text. Also, what does "recall" mean to the subjects of the experiment? If style is "readily responded to," what is its function in the comprehension of the discourse?

Discourse analysis, if it is to deal with discourses as wholes, must recognize that what may seem, to Mandler and Johnson, to be "trivial details" (p. 142) may be

significant elements in the total comprehension of the discourse. Every "literary" discourse (and, as I pointed out above, the distinction between literary and nonliterary is not clear-cut) is partially structured through codes or systems which consist of seemingly "trivial details" (e.g., names, colors, images of fluidity or stasis). The "meaning" of a discourse may depend, partially, on a purposeful ambiguity (c.f., Empson) achieved through any of a number of means, including lack of specificity or causal connection (e.g., "The War of the Ghosts").

In order to judge the validity of a given discourse analysis theory, a discourse must be seen as a reaction to human experience, and analysis of discourse should be an attempt to explain the relationship between the discourse and the experience. This relationship is part of the following continuum:

1. Actual World (infinite detail)
2. Human Experience (much detail organized by social/cultural convention)
3. Discourse (a. selected detail; b. organized against a ground of social/cultural & literary convention for; c. a purpose)
4. Analysis (details of the discourse organized according to the theories of the analyst)

The theories and systems of the analyst should be as sophisticated as possible so as not to unnecessarily oversimplify either the conventions or the organization of the details. To the extent that it does oversimplify these, it distorts the relationship between the discourse and the experience.

By ignoring practically all elements of discourse except events and their structure in plot, the models of discourse analysis so far produced have generally ignored ambiguity and nuance and have discounted "stylistic" elements as aspects of "ill-formedness." An integration of these other elements into discourse analysis theory will make that theory more sophisticated and allow it to explain more complex relationships between discourse and experience. Barbara Leondar's "Hatching Plots: Genesis of Story-making" is an effort in this direction. The theories of J.L. Austin and Kenneth Burke might offer discourse analysts some insights into the relationship between experience

and discourse.

We are left with the question of whether and how discourse analysis can be useful to literary theory and to literary study in general. I have considered theoretical relationships between the two disciplines, but perhaps the most significant use of story grammars in literary study is in pedagogy. Schools have often introduced students to literary works from the most complex level, the level of the "irreducible world." Students often do not know how to read complex literary texts, because they have never been specifically taught the necessary skills. One position on this question is that reduction of the "irreducible whole" violates the work, and there is truth to this, but literary education which begins with showing the structure of "simple stories" and builds to more sophisticated texts can isolate elements to be taught and understood so that both teacher and student know what has been learned and what needs to be learned.

For instance, a student could be initially introduced to the "discourse analysis" concepts of events, episodes, setting, states, acts, spatial and temporal order, etc. and both analyze and produce stories using these concepts. The idea of "schemata" which govern the application of organizational principles to such different types of discourses as fary tales, myths, and proverbs (and newspaper stories, recipes and advertisements) introduces the concepts of literary convention and genre. This would allow an investigation of the ways that particular discourses play on the expectations of their governing schemata. Students can become aware of the inferences which they must make in order to make sense of a discourse and, thus, of the "scripts" (Shank, p. 264) which they use (or do not have) for connecting discourses with their experiences. The model of discourse analysis used for this training must, however, be sophisticated enough to include stylistic elements. It must also account for systems of organization besides plot and beyond spatial, temporal, or causal connection among elements.

Consideration of schemata and of scripts will lead to investigation of social and psychological codes. Such a course of literary education will concentrate only on the level of separate codes, but, by providing a process for analysis, it should make possible later concentration on synthesis and nuance.