Abstract

of the PhD Thesis

Character: the main organizing component of narrative

Narratological and text linguistical analysis of the system of characters in selected short stories by Guy de Maupassant

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My thesis aims to present the system of characters – and also to give a possible description of that system – in a corpus of modern French literary texts. I considered the concept of character (*personnage*) as the main organizing component of narrative texts: a permanent structural element of the story, thus an adequate starting point for an analysis inspired by linguistics.

Two main fields of linguistics served as a theoretical framework for this dissertation: narratology and text linguistics. In the field of narratology, analyses were carried out using A. J. Greimas's actantial model, Ph. Hamon's semiological model of character in a story and G. Genette's definition of 'point of view', whereas text linguistics was represented by B. Combettes' approach to textual coherence.

The corpus for my work was composed of a selection of short stories by Guy de Maupassant. Short story – this literary genre chosen for the analyses –, shows a relatively simple plot structure and offers a rather small range of characters which are easily accessible for analyses through the surface structure of the text. Similar features in the texts allowed having a homogeneous corpus, and suggested the incidence of recurrent structural elements.

In accordance with the objectives of the work, I examined the possible correlations between the two linguistic theories forming the theoretical framework as outlined above. As a main objective within the narratological approach, I particularly focused on the applicability of Greimas' actantial model to the genre of modern short story. Furthermore, I aimed to establish the frames of a potential typology based on the narrative texts forming the corpus.

In the structural analysis of the selected texts, I used specific linguistic data to describe the characteristics of narrative structure, highlighting general features, but also pointing out special cases.

From the corpus I selected and studied five short stories in detail: « Le Crime au Père Boniface », « Farce normande », « Les Bijoux », « Les Bécasses » and « Petit Soldat ». In

these analyses, I examined the text at two levels: the surface structure and the deep structure of the text.

First, I applied a linguistic approach (*lecture horizontale*) related to the system of characters so as to identify the elements of the surface structure. Secondly, a narratological analysis guided by the actantial model (*lecture verticale*) helped to reveal the deep structure of the text: the different realizations of the actantial model in the narrative.

In connection with the realizations of the actantial model, and also in order to distinguish the surface structure and the deep structure of the text, I applied the terms 'scene' (*scène*) and 'segment' (*segment*) respectively.

Scenes being considered as the structural units of the narrative text itself, are determined by elements related to time, place and actions (thus principally by elements of the surface structure, such as: use of tenses, adverbials of time and place, elements of the scenery or the presence of certain characters). Segments are the units of the story representing the specific realizations of the actantial model by the characters – these specific realizations of the abstract model in the texts of the analysed corpus revealed a great variety. I used the term 'interruption' (*rupture*) to delimitate scenes, and the term 'turning point' (*tournant*) to delimitate segments. I found that the interactions *actant–actor* (the latter comprising both *characters* and *non-animate actors*) had an impact on the dynamism of the story.

I used Greimas' actantial model to interpret the system of characters in the texts. To complete this approach, I had recourse to Ph. Hamon's semiological model, which portrays characters in detail, via 'semantic labels' (*étiquettes sémantiques*) containing the particular semantic features of each character. In addition, I also applied G. Genette's definition of 'point of view' (*focalisation*), emphasizing the character's point of view (*focalisation interne*) and its significance in structuring the narrative.

The other main line of my investigation was related to the field of text linguistics and was guided by B. Combettes' approach to textual coherence. I have concluded that character, mainly represented by proper names and anaphoric expressions, operates as an essential contributor to referential continuity, and also supports thematic progression in the text.

Based on the analyses of the selected texts, I established the frames of two typologies.

The first classification, based on the actantial model, considers the stability or the shift of the actantial structure in the story and distinguishes two types of realization of the actantial model:

'Short stories with a fixed actantial structure' present the basic pattern of the distribution of the actantial roles, which remains invariable throughout the whole narrative.

'Short stories with a variable actantial structure' show the redistribution of the actantial roles at the turning points – a shift that may occur once or even several times in the narrative, thus marking the beginning of a new segment. This realization of the actantial model is considered to be a dynamic model, governed by 'driving forces' making the story progress.

The second classification, guided by Hamon's 'semantic labels', made it possible to determine character types based on the texts of the corpus, and also to point out the typical realizations of individual actantial roles.

Narratological analyses confirmed the applicability of Greimas' actantial model to a modern literary genre: the short story. Special realizations of the basic actantial model (e.g. abstract actors, syncretism, incomplete actantial structure) detected in the corpus, offered the possibility of refining the interpretation of Greimas' original model, and of finding new ways to analyse short stories. Text linguistics – operating with specific linguistic data – enhanced the objectivity of describing the system of characters. In conclusion, the complementary application of two mutually enriching fields of linguistics – narratology and text linguistics – has improved our understanding the short story as a type of literary text in general, and the art of Maupassant in particular.