POETIC EFFECTS: A RELEVANCE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract '

The new account of poetic effects in Sperber and Wilson (1986) offers renewed hope for the establishment of a theoretical programme for literary studies. Literary theory needs a theory of verbal communication that can describe and explain such effects. A theory of verbal communication, on the other hand, needs to be able to describe and explain these effects and how they are communicated. This paper argues the mutual advantage to literary and verbal communication theory of developing the relevance theory account of poetic effects, and emphasises in particular the broader implications for literary studies.

1. Introduction ²

Hopes that closer links between linguistics and literary theory might provide more satisfactory theories of reading, in particular, theories of reading literature, have been accompanied by complaints that each side has failed to appreciate what the other has to offer, has misappropriated the other's terminology and watered down concepts. Yet the need to strengthen such links is important. Literary theories assume theories of verbal communication and should be prepared to make these more explicit. Pragmatics, on the other hand, should be comprehensive enough in its scope to account for what and how literary texts communicate. This paper will argue that relevance theory, as outlined in Sperber and Wilson (1986), holds out great promise to those interested in developing a 'literary pragmatics' which is grounded in a sound explanatory theory of verbal communication and which can interact with literary theoretical concerns about the nature of literary communication.

The first section of this paper will argue the need for a theoretical literary pragmatics within literary studies, to describe and explain the communication of poetic effects. The middle sections will provide an inevitably simplified and incomplete account of relevance theory and develop its account of poetic metaphor. A final section will look at an example of stylistic and literary criticism from a Relevance theoretic perspective.

2. Literary pragmatics and literary studies ³

Literary studies can be viewed as an essentially humanistic discipline, engaged in the interpretation and evaluation of texts, such tasks being aided by textual scholarship and the context-ualisation provided by biographical and historical research. This view has been increasingly challenged during the course of this century by calls for a theoretical discipline, related to or based on

insights from linguistic theory, and centred on questions about the
nature of literature and the process of making sense of literary
texts. One line of argument has been that it is not legitimate to
do criticism - to engage in interpretation and evaluation - without
reflecting upon underlying assumptions about what literature is and
how we make sense of it. The first question I would like to address
is: what kind of theoretical discipline might literary studies be?

Early attempts this century to establish a theoretical
programme, for example by the Russian Formalists, sought a
definition of literature, or 'literariness', in features of the
language found in literary texts. The aim of such language, it was
argued, was to draw attention to itself and to 'defamiliarise'.
Similar attempts were made in linguistics, psychology and
anthropology to achieve scientific status by taking as data only
what is directly observable. The main problem with such approaches
is that what is significant over behaviour - in this case
linguistic behaviour - can only be determined by appeals to people's
ideas about what is significant. It is only possible to describe
what literature is, for example, by taking into account readers'
experience. Certain Formalist ideas have enriched literary
stylistics, but as a theoretical programme Formalism has had to
give way to or become absorbed into theories of reading and how we
make sense of literary texts.

It had been thought that theory was only possible if one could
avoid going into the minds of individual readers. If, however, one
was unable to define literature without appealing to readers' ideas
about literature how was one to proceed? The reason why semiotics
and structuralism had such a tremendous and exciting impact on
literary studies was that they offered a way out of this impasse.
These approaches addressed the question: how do we make sense of
literary texts? Their answer was that, as all communication
operates through codes or systems of signs, so there are
specifically literary codes, structures and systems of signs, which
enable us to make sense of literary communication. Literary codes,
although somehow represented in the minds of individuals are
conventional, shared, and hence have a kind of objective status. The
task of literary theory, then, is to explore literary codes, describe
them and explain how they operate. This theoretical programme,
however, has failed to satisfactorily locate such codes. The search
seems sometimes to have been downgraded, as it appears to be in
Culler (1975), to a discussion of general ad hoc discourse
conventions, which are too vaguely defined to be of any use to a
fully explanatory theory.

One of the major criticisms of such a theoretical undertaking
must be that the code-model view of communication is now generally
seen as descriptively inadequate. Since Grice (1975) models of
verbal communication have had to find a role for inference. One
might say that semiotic and structuralist theories confuse their
semantics and their pragmatics. They assume that a decoding
process leads directly (in the case of reading) from marks on the
page to thoughts in the mind of the reader. Although it is clear
that language itself is a code it is also clear, as will be argued
more fully in the next section, that inferencing plays an essential
role in verbal communication.

Not only is the search for literary codes illusory then, but semiotic and structuralist theories inevitably fail to provide realistic psychological accounts of the reading process. Eco's (1981) sophisticated attempt to develop an explicit semiotic theory of reading, for example, is totally inadequate in this respect. He argues for the reader's creative role in choosing which of the virtual properties of the sememes present in a text are to be actualised. But he fails to discuss the principles according to which readers make their choice, or to discuss more generally what drives the interpretation process. An answer to such questions is essential if one is to have a sound explanatory theory: reading is nothing if not a psychological process.

Kiparsky (1987) accuses Jakobson's (1960) programme for literary studies of failing to bear fruit because it was founded in an inadequate pre-Chomskyan linguistics and an equally inadequate semiotic communication theory. He argues, however, that given a superior linguistics and theory of verbal communication (here pointing to Sperber and Wilson (1986)), Jakobson's attempt to establish a theory should be defended against 'anti-theorists' such as Fish. Kiparsky sides with what he sees as Jakobson's 'essentialist' position, against what he terms Fish's 'conventionalist' position.

The conventionalist view of literary studies - that meanings do not reside in texts: they are imposed upon texts through conventions of reading by 'interpretative communities' - might be seen either as an alternative theory or a challenge to theory. Fish (1980: ch.14) discusses an exercise he performed with a group of students trained in reading English religious poetry of the 17th century. He left a list of names (of linguists and a literary critic) on the board after a previous class and told his students that it was a religious poem he wanted them to comment upon. They duly proceeded to give a fairly convincing interpretation. And so, says Fish, it is not so much what is in the text that counts, but how one reads it, the implication being that if you read a text as literature it becomes literary. Culler (1975) makes a similar point when he takes a piece of ordinary journalism and sets it down on the page in the form of a poem.

The view that literature is what one reads as literature, the conventionalist position, is one I would strongly wish to challenge. For one thing I would argue that most attempts to duplicate Culler's experiment would look too much like journalistic prose chopped up and put into lines to resemble poetry. Similarly most poetry written out as prose would look like poetry written out as prose. If it were possible to create poems in this way, then fifteen minutes with a newspaper, scissors, paper and glue would be enough to prepare a complete manuscript to send off to Faber and Faber. Were this attempted the more difficult job might be to persuade the editors that it did not matter about the quality of the 'poems', the point was that they could be read as poems. The real point, however, is that value (or what I am calling poetic effects) is central to poems. This is why poets bother to work through various drafts of poems: it is not sufficient that first and final drafts can both be read as poems. Whatever conventions of reading are imposed from the outside only a certain range of texts will

communicate poetic effects. The religious symbols discovered in the list of linguists' names are not poetic symbols. The cryptic cross-word view of reading poems that Fish seems to encourage leaves one asking the question : why all this effort for such meagre returns?

Fish's conventionalist position has no developed theory of verbal communication and sees no need for a psychological account of reading. The kinds of linguistics and communication theory that Kiparsky's essentialist position argues are fundamental to a sound theoretical programme in literary studies receive support from Fabb (1988). Here Fabb argues that Saussurean linguistics is 'of historical interest but of little current relevance' for linguists today. Structuralists and poststructuralists in literary theory, however, find Saussure's ideas to be vital to their concerns. The reason for this strange state of affairs, it is suggested, is that linguistics and literary studies are two essentially different kinds of discipline. Chomskyan linguistic theory investigates structures which are actually there in the mind/brain. It makes predictive statements which can be tested against the facts. Literary theory, on the other hand, is the kind of apriori discipline that Saussure envisaged for linguistics, 'existing in advance of (and creating) its object, rather than being derived from its object.' (Fabb,1988:52). It seems to me, however, that those literary theories relying on Saussurean concepts should be called into question, not only in the context of modern linguistic theory, but also of pragmatic theory. If one accepts a theory of communication such as relevance theory, as Fabb explicitly does, then one should be able to accept a theory of literary communication, a theory of poetic effects, that is not, as relevance theory is not, an a priori theory.

One of the key questions asked by current literary theory is: how do we interpret literary texts? I will leave the relevance theory answer to this question till the next section. Here I would like to suggest that questions about evaluation should be as important to the literary theorist as questions about interpretation. In fact the question of value, which I would link to the question of poetic effects, is the central fact that theory has to explain. Why is it that final drafts of poems are so different from first drafts? Quite simply, the difference is one of value, of poetic effects. It is this that the poet is trying to achieve, not an interpretative puzzle. It is because the question of value is not central that other theoretical approaches often end up talking about texts in general, or reject the distinction between the literary and the non-literary, or argue that any text can be read as 'literary'.

I would also argue that a theoretical literary pragmatics should not intrude upon criticism. Lodge's (1986) discussion of Hemingway's 'Cat in the Rain' is a clear example of theory dictating to criticism. Lodge discusses Hagopian's interpretation of the man in the rubber cape as a symbol of contraception and concludes that such an interpretation is impossible because rain can symbolise fertility only 'when defined by opposition to drought'. Immediately prior to this Lodge states:

> 'Here, it seems to me, the structuralist notion of language
> as a system of differences and meaning as the product of
> structural oppositions can genuinely help to settle a point
> of interpretation.' (Lodge 1986: 30).

This seems to me to be a patently absurd argument. Leaving aside
the question of whether one accepts this definition of language and
meaning - which most contemporary linguistic theorists do not -
theory should surely be describing and explaining readings, not the
other way round.

My view is that literary studies should comprise two distinct
but related disciplines. On the one hand interpretative and
evaluative criticism is an essentially humanistic discipline. Its
insights are intuitive and personal. It is written to share
experiences of reading which it considers valuable, and to enhance
appreciation. It should not be written to make points about the
relationship between signifiers and signifieds. On the other hand,
a theoretical discipline is possible, based on a theoretical literary
pragmatics that seeks to describe and explain poetic effects. This
theoretical discipline requires that the other humanistic discipline
thrive, because theory necessarily needs to work with, describe and
explain the readings that criticism produces. A good theory of
reading literary texts that encompasses poetic effects needs to be
based on a theory of communication that is descriptively and
explanatorily more adequate than previous semiotic models. Such a
theory, I believe, is relevance theory, to which I turn in the next
section.

3. Relevance theory: an overview [a]

Relevance theory assumes that a coding process linking
phonetic or graphemic patterns to semantic representations takes
place automatically within the language module (language being an
input system, as argued in Fodor(1983)) and that these
representations are passed on to the central thought processes for
pragmatic inferencing. The inferencing process involves disambigu-
ation, reference assignment, the enriching of semantic (conceptual)
representations and addition of material to achieve fully
propositional forms, and then the possible derivation of
implicatures. (These will be illustrated shortly).

The code model of verbal communication, linking phonetic or
graphemic patterns directly to complete conceptual representations,
is rejected as descriptively inadequate. Communication affects
possibilities of thought rather than transferring thoughts from one
mind to another by means of a code that links signal-message pairs.
Sets of assumptions are derived through an inference process that
exploits decoded semantic representations. Their effects within a
given mind are not entirely predictable.

The key to pragmatic inferencing is the principle of relevance
which states that every act of inferential communication carries a
guarantee of its own optimal relevance, i.e. a guarantee that the
hearer will derive a satisfying range of cognitive effects for the
minimum justifiable processing effort. The cognitive effects can be
in the form of contextual implications, confirmations and
strengthenings of already held assumptions, or contradictions of
already held assumptions which lead to their being abandoned.
Quoting from Sperber and Wilson (1985/1986:162): "The speaker's task
is to make sure that the thought she intends to convey is
consistent with the principle of relevance: otherwise, she runs the

risk of not being properly understood. The hearer's task is to find the interpretation which is consistent with the principle of relevance; otherwise, he runs the risk of misunderstanding the utterance or not understanding it at all."

Relevance theory claims to be able to account more satisfactorily for a wider range of communication than much modern pragmatics does. It claims for instance to offer a precise account of vaguer communicative effects. Two examples from Sperber and Wilson (1986) will illustrate this.

(1) Peter: Do you want some coffee?
    Mary: Coffee would keep me awake.

For Peter's utterance, reference would have to be assigned to 'you', 'coffee' would have to be disambiguated, 'some' and 'want' would have to be enriched and further information would have to be added about time before a fully propositional form could be arrived at. The following might be a rough version of such a proposition (with more or less precise values assigned to x and t):

(2) Mary wants to drink a certain amount x of coffee drink at time t.

The propositional form is embedded in a general speech act type given by the linguistic form of the utterance (in particular here, the word order), and thence in a propositional attitude such as:

(3) Peter wants to know whether ...

if this is taken to be a genuine question, which it surely would be here. Within a given context the utterance might encourage Mary to access further contextual assumptions. The full propositional form is arrived at through the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance. Clearly if Peter and Mary were shopping in a supermarket, then enriching 'want' to mean 'want to buy' and disambiguating 'coffee' to mean tin or jar or packet of coffee beans or powder would be more appropriate since it would lead to a satisfactory range of contextual effects, and at less effort than the interpretation given in (2). If they were at home then proposition (2) would be likely to yield an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance. Understanding Peter's utterance to have come with a guarantee of relevance, Mary would take the most accessible proposition to be the one Peter intended her to accept, provided it had sufficient contextual effects and, put her to no unjustifiable effort in achieving them.

Focussing now on Mary's reply a similar process would lead to another full propositional form being accessed. In order for it to have relevance in the context of Peter's question one of the following pairs of implicated premise and implicated conclusion would typically need to be accessed:

(4)(a) Mary does not want to stay awake.
    (b) Mary does not want coffee.
(5)(a) Mary does want to stay awake.
    (b) Mary does want coffee.

If Mary had answered Peter directly, (4)(a) or (5)(a) would probably not have needed to be accessed.   The extra processing effort involved in deducing (4)(b) or (5)(b) from the combination of (4)(a), or (5)(a) with Mary's utterance must be offset by further contextual effects not obtainable from the direct answer.   It is important to note here that (4)(a), (4)(b), (5)(a) and (5)(b) are all fully determinate implicatures   and it is possible to say that through her utterance Mary commits herself to the truth of one of these pairs.

Another example should help to introduce a further argument.

(6) Peter: Would you drive a Mercedes?
    Mary: I wouldn't drive ANY expensive car.

Peter would use the following assumption derived from encyclopaedic information about expensive cars as an implicated premise:

(7) A Mercedes is an expensive car.

Mary's utterance in (6) processed in the context of (7) would yield the following implicated conclusion:

(8) Mary would not drive a Mercedes.

By not answering Peter directly Mary has demanded greater processing effort from him but achieves consistency with the principle of relevance in that a whole range of further possible assumptions are made mutually manifest.   Some of these, as for example (7), would be strongly implicated.   Peter could add, among others, the following premises and conclusions:

(9) (a) A Rolls Royce is an expensive car.
    (b) Mary would not drive a Rolls Royce.
(10) (a) A Cadillac is an expensive car.
     (b) Mary would not drive a Cadillac.

It is uncertain, however, that Mary is as fully committed to the truth of (9) and (10) as she is to (7) and (8), although it is also clear that Peter would be entitled to hold assumptions (9)(b) and (10)(b) relatively strongly.   He might also access the following:

(11)(a) An Alfa Romeo is an expensive car.
     (b) Mary would not drive an Alfa Romeo.

One could argue that if Peter derived assumption (11)(b) then it would be more weakly implicated than (9)(b) and (10)(b).   Peter could continue to speculate about other cars that Mary would not drive.   He might also find it worth the effort to use (12)(a) as a context for accessing (12)(b):

(12)(a) People who would not drive an expensive car would not
go on a cruise either.
(b) Mary would not go on a cruise.

However, there is no reason to think (in normal circumstances) that
this is part of what Mary wanted to communicate. The examples
provided illustrate that there is no clear cut-off point between
assumptions which the speaker certainly endorses and assumptions
derived purely on the hearer's responsibility. (The hearer could go
on to speculate further about Mary's character.)
   One further example, which will not be explored here in detail,
shows that it is sometimes the case that although the speaker
clearly intends to make manifest a range of implicated assumptions,
it is not clear that any of these need be specifically intended.

(13) Peter: What do you intend to do today?
Mary: I have a terrible headache.

   The point is that some utterances communicate a determinate
set of assumptions, all strongly endorsed by the speaker; other
utterances   communicate   a   relatively   indeterminate   set   of
assumptions, only some, or maybe none, of which are clearly endorsed
by the speaker.   Modern pragmatics tends to concentrate on
determinate implicatures and fails to recognise that, rather than
two classes of implicature, determinate and indeterminate, there is a
continuum from fully determinate to very indeterminate. Code model
theorists and semioticians have no psychologically adequate way of
explaining the 'vague' or 'connotative' effects that occur at the
indeterminate end of the continuum. But a precise account of this
indeterminacy is essential for a comprehensive theory of verbal
communication. Its pertinence to the discussion of poetic effects
will become apparent shortly.
   The approach outlined so far, showing how propositional forms
and implicatures are identified, does not require knowledge of a set
of conversational maxims, to be used as premises in inference. It
also has the advantage of being able to show not only how but also
why a particular interpretation of an utterance is arrived at. The
Gricean account, for example, attempted to show how, but not why a
particular interpretation should have been privileged over any
number of other interpretations that could have been selected using
the conversational maxims as premises. To this extent the Gricean
account is merely ex post facto and is neither explicit nor
explanatory.
   Context is a crucial factor in utterance interpretation and
here again relevance theory offers an alternative to the commonly
held view that context is prior to interpretation. This alternative
view argues that contexts are chosen, not given, and that the choice
is constrained by the consideration of relevance. Those contexts
are chosen which are necessary for consistency with the principle
of relevance. It is simply not realistic or psychologically
plausible to assume that every time an utterance is made the entire
potential context is made equivalently accessible. The potential
context, it should be noted, consists of assumptions that have been
made manifest in previous utterances, assumptions about the

participants in the verbal exchange, assumptions derived from encyclopaedic entries of concepts used in any of the assumptions mentioned so far, assumptions derived from the encyclopaedic entries of concepts in these assumptions, and so on ad infinitum. In other words the potential context consists of the entire set of assumptions we might entertain at any given moment. Some contexts are more immediately accessible than others and as it requires further processing effort to derive the less immediately accessible contexts, one goes as far as is necessary to achieve an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance. Once these are obtained, processing effort rules out any further deconstructionist free play.

4. A relevance view of metaphor and poetic effects

One use of language which might seem to require a more extensive search for context is metaphor. Metaphorical use is seen in relation to a literalness-looseness continuum. Looseness is defined in terms of formal and logical resemblances between the propositional form of an utterance and the propositional form of the thought of the speaker. Propositional forms can resemble each other to greater or lesser degrees; utterances can, therefore, be said to be more or less loose. Literalness, in this view, "is simply maximal resemblance, and enjoys no privileged status."(Sperber & Wilson, 1987: 708). The following exchange could illustrate the notion of loose talk:

> (14) Peter: How much do you earn?
> Mary: £800 a month.

Mary's utterance would be loose if, for example, Mary in fact earned £797.39p a month and she recalls this amount. In normal circumstances the speaker, with the aim of achieving optimal relevance, would judge it to be not worth the hearer's while to exert the extra effort of processing '£797.39p' when the same contextual effects in terms of assumptions about spending power, standard of living, etc., can be obtained more easily from processing '£800' in an utterance whose propositional form resembles that of the speaker's thought. It is the drive to optimise relevance which guides interpretation, not the assumption of literalness. Literalness is just one possible way of optimising relevance.

Metaphorical use of language is similar to such examples of loose talk: the propositional form of the utterance resembles rather than reproduces the propositional form of the speaker's thought. Most pragmatists would seek an explanation for the interpretation of (15) (as Searle (1979) in fact does), by first of all decoding a literal meaning and then trying to work out a rule or principle for deriving the intended meaning from the literal meaning.

> (15) Sally is a block of ice.

Grice would start from the observation that such a sentence flouts the maxim of quality (truthfulness) on the literal level (the level of what is said). This maxim would be used as a premise in the

inferential process of deriving the intended meaning. As suggested
in the discussion of loose talk, the relevance theory view would not
require a rule or principle to operate on an initial literal
interpretation, in this example, involving blocks of ice called
Sally. The propositional form of this utterance would be seen as
resembling the propositional form of the speaker's thought. The
interpretation of (15) involves bringing together the encyclopaedic
entries of 'Sally' and 'block of ice' to create a range of contextual
implications most of which will be rejected as contradictory. There
is probably no single strong implicature that can be accessed, but a
range of less-than-strong implicatures to do with Sally being very
reserved, unemotional, difficult to form a relationship with, etc.
Deriving such a range of weak implicatures would ensure the
relevance of (15). In short, metaphor "requires no special
interpretive abilities or procedures: it is a natural outcome of some
very general abilities and procedures used in verbal communication".
(Sperber and Wilson 1986: 237).
        Poetic metaphors are defined as those that typically achieve
their relevance through the accessing of a very wide range of weak
implicatures. The wider the range and the weaker the implicatures
the more poetic the metaphor, and the more responsibility the hearer
- or in this case, more likely, the reader - has to take to access
them. One might say that a greater imaginative commitment   is
required of the hearer/reader.
        The example of poetic metaphor used by Sperber and Wilson
(1986:237) is the following remark made by Flaubert of the poet
Leconte de Lisle:

        (16) Son encre est pale. (His ink is pale).

Here there are no strong assumptions to the truth of which Flaubert
can be said to have committed himself. The considerable processing
effort involved in searching for contexts against which implicatures
can be identified is offset by the vast range of implicatures that
are accessible. The context is extended through exploring the
encyclopaedic entries of the concepts 'ink' and 'pale'. The entry for
ink might include information such as:

        (17) One uses ink when writing by hand.

The entry for handwriting/writing by hand might include:

        (18) Handwriting is often taken as an indication of character.

Within this context one might arrive at assumptions of the form:

        (19) Leconte de Lisle's character is 'pale'.

After exploration of 'pale' one might obtain implicatures such as:

        (20) Leconte de Lisle's character is weak.

Many other steps have been passed over but the general process
should be clear. Other implicatures would include:

(21)(a) Leconte de Lisle's writing lacks contrasts.
   (b) Leconte de Lisle's writing may fade.
   (c) Leconte de Lisle's poetry is weak.
   (d) Leconte de Lisle's writings will not last.
   (e) Leconte de Lisle does not put his whole heart
      into his work.

There are an indefinite number of further implicatures one could add
to (20) and the list in (21), all of which would be weak in the
sense described, and there is no cut-off point that allows us to say
that so many implicatures are communicated and no more. But it is
the range and the indeterminateness and shared responsibility of the
implicatures which give the metaphor its poetic force.
    These factors explain why it is that metaphors, especially
poetic metaphors, can never be adequately translated or paraphrased.
They explain why one person's interpretation can differ from
another's. They also answer Levinson's (1983) claim that pragmatic
accounts fail to explain the motivation or the expressive power of
metaphor. This discussion of poetic effects can be extended to
those symbols or images, generally found in literature, whose
effects are 'vague' or 'connotative'. Symbols are poetic insofar as
they weakly implicate a wide range of assumptions in the manner
described above for poetic metaphor.
    It is possible to suggest that the rapid search, exploration
and bringing together of chunks of information stored in the
encyclopaedic entries of many disparate concepts (an exploration
which might be done, at least in part, in parallel) involves a
different kind of mental effort, energy and chemistry. One might
even talk here of a special ability, referred to as 'evocation' in
Sperber (1974). This is a highly speculative area, but a different
mental energy and chemistry could explain the effects of more
sensitive readings of poetry, even the bristling of the hair, shiver
down the spine, and constriction of the throat that poets such as
Housman and Graves claim accompany the reading of _true_ poetry. It
is perhaps too bold at this stage to suggest that the effects of
this wide-ranging parallel search in top gear can result in visits
from the White Goddess!

5. Poetic effects and literary criticism.

    I would now like to consider the notion of poetic effects in
the context of issues raised by stylistic and literary criticism.
To do this I will examine a controversy concerning the
interpretation of a particular poem. The controversy is to be found
in Widdowson (1975: chapt.7) and the poem is Robert Frost's Stopping
by Woods on a Snowy Evening, given on the next page.

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village, though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Widdowson uses his discussion of the poem as an illustration
of the pedagogical usefulness of stylistic analysis in moving from a
close examination of the linguistic features of texts to literary
appreciation and interpretation. From linguistic clues - for
example, the use of possessives, the 'thematic positioning' of whose
woods (which also highlights the notion of possession), the
treatment of the word woods first as though it possessed the
semantic feature /+artefact/ and then as if it did not - Widdowson
develops an interpretation of the poem whose theme is: 'that of the
reality of social constraints, of rights and obligations, in
opposition to that of natural freedom' (Widdowson,1975:121).

He then presents a counter argument from a teacher who
objected to this interpretation. The teacher, a Mr Bolt, argues that
the characteristic verse features of the poem include a repetition
of the final lines which encourages the view that a metaphorical
sense for sleep is intended. Sleep is to be understood here as
die. The woods, then, become 'the Forest of Death' and the house in
the village becomes the graveyard. This interpretation - which
Widdowson accepts as possible, although he personally considers it
'too weighty a construction' to be placed upon the linguistic
evidence afforded by the text - leads Bolt to conclude that the real
theme of the poem is the strong attraction of death which the poet
finally overcomes.

How is it that two experienced readers of poetry can disagree
so much about the meaning of what might appear at first sight not
to be a particularly obscure poem? One might argue, with Widdowson,
that poems are by nature ambiguous, open to different interpret-
ations. If this were so, would it not be the case that the search
for optimal relevance would lead the reader to privilege one of
these possible interpretations over the others?

It is not difficult to see how it could be argued that Bolt's
interpretation is guided by the search for relevance. He focusses
upon the word sleep in the final lines. This particular instance of
epizeuxis should encourage the reader to explore the encyclopaedic

entries of the concepts involved here a lot more carefully. The
entry for 'miles', for example, would not appear to offer promising
material. The exploration of the entry for 'sleep', on the other
hand, would lead to the fruitful comparison or equation of sleep
with death, quite quickly in fact if the reader is familiar with a
certain poetic or cultural tradition. Using the idea that the poem
is about death as part of the context enables the reader to equate
woods with 'Forest of Death' and house in the village with
graveyard. Reference can be assigned to the third person pronouns
of the first verse and certain items like 'house' and 'woods' can be
enriched.

Widdowson's search for relevance works at the same level, that
of trying to find a context in terms of which details of the poem
might be contextually enriched. To take one example, the sound of
the bells 'which might be said to suggest the world of human
affairs' is contrasted with the sound of the 'easy wind'. These
meanings are emphasised in a context stressing the opposition
between social and natural values.

So, is it a death-wish, or is it a longing for elemental
freedom that entices the poem's narrator to linger in the woods?
Could it be either? Or both? Clearly, responses to poetry will
never be absolutely identical, because cognitive environments are
never identical. But responses to poems can be more or less
successful, and I would suggest here that the Bolt reading is the
richer of the two: the poem resonates with extra meaning. I would
also suggest that Bolt's reading could be richer still. The problem
with both of the views of Frost's poem expressed above is that they
seek to express the meaning of the poem in terms of a few,
presumably strong, assumptions. They treat the poem as a kind of
cryptic crossword. The fun is in solving the problem the poet sets,
using clues that are linguistic or symbolic/metaphoric. When the
answer is worked out it can be expressed relatively
straightforwardly, albeit, in Widdowson's case, with the recognition
that other interpretations are possible and that poetic messages are
essentially irreducible.

When discussing the ambiguous nature of poetry it is important
to point out that it is not the case that a poem offers a set of
determinate alternative meanings to choose from. Images, symbols,
metaphors within the poem interact to make manifest a vast range of
weak implicatures. Individual readers would not access all the same
implicatures or the same number of implicatures. But if they were
responding to the poem in the most appropriate way, they would not
isolate one or a small set of these implicatures and privilege them
above the others. To say, for example, that in uttering (16)
Flaubert intended one and only one of the implicatures listed in
(21) would be a distortion. To search for relevance in poems, which
often require an inordinate amount of processing effort, one needs
to look for very extensive cognitive effects. If, after detective
work, poems can only produce straightforward statements then they
cannot be said to be relevant in the technical or everyday sense of
the word.

What I am chiefly objecting to again is the emphasis given to
interpretation at the expense of evaluation. A poem is written and
read for its value which derives from its poetic effects. A poem is

successful and has value to the extent that it communicates poetic
effects. A poem does not deliberately set out to be obscure, to turn
interpretation into a problem or issue. Seamus Heaney has made the
point that poets often have to sacrifice 'decency' - making their
poems easily accessible - to 'accuracy' meaning accuracy in putting
'feelings into words', or, to interpret his phrase, accuracy in
communicating poetic effects.[8]

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued the need for a new theoretical
discipline of literary pragmatics within literary studies. Literary
pragmatics I see as an 'essentialist' theory which asks questions
about, describes and explains poetic effects. It is crucially
distinct from current ideas in its conception of theory, in its
'essentialism' and in its focus on literary value. It is a theory of
readings rather than a method of reading. It is important for this
theory that criticism as a humanistic discipline be truly and
independently interpretative and evaluative, not limited or directed
in its discussion by 'theoretical' ideas. This means that I am not
only arguing that a truly theoretical essentialist discipline is
possible, I am arguing that a truly humanistic interpretative and
evaluative discipline is also possible and also necessary.

All literary theories need to be grounded in theories of verbal
communication. I have argued that relevance theory is descriptively
and explanatorily more adequate as a general pragmatic theory than
any of the theories of verbal communication assumed, either
explicitly or implicitly, by literary theories so far. I have argued
that the relevance theory account of poetic effects offers the best
theory available of literary communication. It can offer an
explanation of 'value' and be used to support the argument that
'evaluation' should play the central role in literary theory and
literary criticism. The relevance theory account of poetic effects
can, in short, form the basis of a theoretical literary pragmatics,
and, perhaps, once more allow the literary critic to become the
poet's ally in his struggle with the philosophers.

7. Notes

1. This paper was presented at the First Symposium of Literary
Pragmatics organised by Prof.R.Sell at Abo Akademi, Finland,
September 1988, and will be appearing in the collection of
Symposium papers edited by Prof.Sell. I would like to thank him for
commissioning and encouraging the writing of this paper and for his
permission to have it printed in this volume.

2. I would like to thank Robyn Carston, of the Linguistics
Department of University College London, for her detailed and
extremely helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. She
is, of course, in no way responsible for the ideas ultimately
expressed.

3. In placing my idea of a theoretical literary pragmatics within the context of previous theoretical positions, I am obliged to be extremely succinct. I can, unfortunately, do justice neither to the theories described nor to the valuable work done by certain exponents of these theories.

4. All quotations in Sections 3 and 4, unless otherwise stated, are from Sperber and Wilson (1986).

5. This distinction was made by Seamus Heaney at a public poetry reading given in October, 1986.

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