

CHAPTER EIGHT

COOPERATION AND POLITENESS  
IN LITERARY DISCOURSE:  
A PRAGMATIC STYLISTIC APPROACH

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**Abstract**

This chapter aims to show that pragmatics, which is seen as the study of language use related to particular contexts and situations, can prove relevant to the study of literary discourse. This untraditional project of applying pragmatic theory to the study of literary (written) texts has raised objections from various authors. My aim is to claim that novelists create characters and situations in ways that are relevant to our interpretation of the discourse, and that pragmatic theories help us to understand the process of contextualization in literary texts. I explore linguistic interaction involving only written language, where paralanguage and extra-linguistic cues for interpretation of particular messages and (culture specific) aspects, such as (satirical) humour and irony, are lost. Main research problems include pragmatic approaches to irony, the Cooperative and Politeness principle. The language material analysed is a collection of short stories by Doris Lessing, *London Observed* (1993).

**1 Introduction**

Most discussions of stylistics as a field of study, characterized by a variety of approaches and dynamic trends in development, would fit quite well within the definition provided by Wales: “Stylistics characteristically deals with the interpretation of texts by focusing in detail on relevant distinctive linguistic features, patterns, structures or levels and on their significance and effects on readers” (Wales 2006: 216). Recently,

semantic and pragmatic dimensions in stylistic analysis have been emphasized and elaborated to such an extent that one can observe convergences of the concepts and research methods within the field of stylistic, textual and discourse analyses. More recently, the interface between stylistics and pragmatics has been recognized and the field of pragmatic stylistics acknowledged.

In the next section, my aim is to provide more details on the interface between stylistics and pragmatics, which will enable me to proceed towards the discussion of particular ways of applying traditional (Gricean) pragmatic concepts and principles in literary discourse analysis. Further on, I will also consider a variety of objections raised to the project of applying pragmatic theory to the study of written/literary texts, providing text samples with commentary as exemplifications of the most discussed and criticised aspects of this process. Further issues discussed in subsequent sections of this chapter are analysing literary text as discourse, the Cooperative and the Politeness principle, and the concept of interpersonal rhetoric. I will also comment on the concept of irony and humour as a means of mutual interaction and expressions of close relationship (friendly mocking). The following discussion is always based on a series of analyses and commentaries of rich language material, the text samples chosen being from the collection of short stories by Doris Lessing (1993).

Before proceeding to the above-mentioned issues, I want to note that in my analysis the written (literary) discourse is always viewed as a message, which is to be interpreted by the reader via the process of contextualization. Attempting to establish certain links with a particular context, the problem of situational context becomes apparent (cf. Widdowson 2004). The novelist (producer of the message) and the reader (recipient of the message) have usually different contexts of situations. Thus the recipient may interpret the discourse in different ways, or even arrive at a different interpretation than that intended by the author. Here the pragmatic approaches to literary text/discourse are useful as they often provide the clues to understanding the (features of) context.

## **2 The interface between stylistics and pragmatics**

There are many definitions of style and stylistics. Different authors see the focus of stylistic study differently and to choose one definition, which would grasp the nature of stylistic endeavour in its full extent, is by no means easy. Perhaps the most observable tendency in modern stylistics is the growing interest of stylistic scholars in pragmatics and discourse

analysis. Leech and Short (2007) talk about a “pragmatic turn” and a “cognitive turn”. Frameworks which have followed the “cognitive turn” focus on the nature of literary interpretation, perceiving it as a cognitive process of “making sense”, in the broadest sense, of a story and a way of telling it (Leech and Short 2007: 306). The interest in interpretations and effects inevitably raises questions about contexts, including the social contexts in which texts are interpreted.

The most characteristic feature of modern stylistics is the focus on the interpretative and social dimensions of stylistic analyses; the interest in interpretations and effects inevitably raises questions about contexts in which texts are interpreted. As noted by Stockwell “a growing body of work in stylistics marries up detailed analysis at the micro-linguistic level with a broader view of the communicative context” and thus “stylistics *necessarily* involves the simultaneous practice of linguistic analysis and awareness of the interpretative and social dimension” (Stockwell 2006: 755). As Stockwell further points out, the numerous different developments that can be outlined in modern stylistics “all have in common the basic stylistic tenets of being rigorous, systematic, transparent and open to falsifiability... In short, they present themselves as aspects of a social science of literature” (Stockwell 2006: 755).

The focus of this paper is on pragmatic principles applied in the process of understanding and interpreting literary discourse. This approach is social in that it focuses on the principles of cooperation and politeness as employed by individuals, affected by the given social contexts in which communication and interpretation of messages take place.

The interface between stylistics and pragmatics can be best characterized as a process of applying pragmatic principles to stylistic analyses of texts. A natural assumption is that Gricean or post-Gricean approaches can explain how characters understand each other and how we understand characters. Of course, we have to consider the layers of discourse and differentiate “between work that applies the pragmatic models to examples of communicative interaction between fictional participants in literary texts, and work that addresses the nature of the interaction between writer and reader” (cf. McMahon 2006: 232).

### 3 Pragmatics

Most discussions of pragmatics place the emphasis on the fact that pragmatics allows humanity into interpretation and analysis of communication—the speaker’s meaning, his or her intentions, play a crucial role. In this sense, more is communicated than is said. In the study of

pragmatics, more than one tradition has developed. The most influential are probably the linguistic and philosophical traditions associated with the work of Paul Grice (1975); another tradition brings about a broader and more sociological approach to pragmatic concepts. Attempts to define pragmatics as the cognitive, social and cultural study of language and communication have also been recognized (cf. Mey 1998, Verschueren, Östman and Blommaert 1995). Given that pragmatics covers such a wide range of phenomena, and given the assumption that pragmatic stylistics applies ideas from pragmatics, then the term pragmatic stylistics must cover a similarly wide range.

#### **4 Pragmatic stylistics**

As illustrated in the previous section, pragmatics, stylistics and pragmatic stylistics can be understood in different ways. In this study, I will focus on the application of pragmatic principles in the study of literary discourse. In my view, the process of stylistic analysis interfaces with discourse analysis and the literary text can be seen and analysed as literary discourse. By focusing on discourse aspects of literary text, I intend to demonstrate that the principles of cooperation and politeness, as well as the Irony principle and other aspects of interpersonal rhetoric, can be equally applied to the spoken as well as written communication. My assumption is that the author of a literary text provides readers with all the clues which are necessary to decipher discourse messages. The novelist creates particular settings, contexts and situations, which substitute for a real life environment. My aim is to consider the ways texts give rise to particular effects (pragmatic approach focusing on Cooperative and Politeness principles applied to a stylistic approach). Exploring cooperation between characters in the analysed literary text, the conception of interpersonal rhetoric introduced by Leech will be implemented and his hierarchy of pragmatic principles studied and discussed (Leech 1983). Prior attention is devoted to the principles of Cooperation and Politeness as first-order principles, the Irony and Banter principles as higher-order principles, and the Interest and Pollyanna principles (applied in the study of humour, which often develops to or overlaps with irony). Understanding literary discourse often involves interpreting indirect, more or less unpredictable messages. Here, the role of shared background knowledge, schemata, frames and scenarios (work in pragmatic stylistics has also largely focused on psychological processes involved in the understanding of texts) is crucial.

## 5 Applying traditional (Gricean) pragmatic concepts and principles in literary discourse analysis

In this section, I will discuss some of the main objections against the applicability of pragmatic theories to literary discourse. There have been suggestions that it seems impossible to apply the Cooperative principle to literary discourse because it applies primarily to interaction between acquaintances, not intimates or those in disparate power relationships (cf. Cook 1994). As these critics often observe, the maxims are regularly broken in quarrels, when we are repetitive, irrelevant and probably do not pay much attention to the truth. However, it is just because of this nature of interaction that we are aware of a certain norm of cooperative behaviour. In other words, it is because the maxims are infringed that we judge it against a norm of cooperative behaviour. In defence of the project of applying pragmatic principles in literary texts/discourse, some authors see the readers as observers. Black says that readers are “voyeurs” who observe with interest, and “are perhaps prepared to adopt whatever attitudes may be necessary for the willing suspension of disbelief” (Black 2006: 31). We might not fully accept Black viewing readers as voyeurs (the term raises some unwished connotations and it also implies that the voyeur observes other people secretly, which is not the case of literary works; these are produced with the intention of being openly publicized and read by anyone). However, we can agree with her that (competent and cautious) readers are perhaps interested in small and often unimportant details of characters’ lives. Also, the readers will judge the language they encounter using the same means they would use it to occur in real life. In the following example, consider the ways the speakers are aware of the Cooperative principle’s maxims:

(1) (DL 79)

They did my car in, they drove past so near they scraped all the paint off that side. I saw them do it. I was at my window—just luck, that was. They were laughing like dogs. Then they turned around and drove back and scraped the paint off the other side. They went off like bats out of hell. They saw me at the window and laughed.

As the sample illustrates, the maxims are regularly broken in excited conversations, arguments and quarrels. In this particular utterance the speaker is angry and breaks all maxims of the Cooperative principle, mainly the maxim of Quality and Quantity. Due to his excitement and anger he is repetitive (breaks the Quantity maxim) and irrelevant (breaks the maxim of Relevance). It is also typical of spontaneous spoken

utterances to be general and vague, even ambiguous, because the speakers often do not pay much attention to the truth and break the Quality maxim.

According to Cook (1994) the wide range of works regarded as literary, which range from the fairly factual to the fantastic, shows that the question of the truthfulness (i.e. the Quality maxim) of an utterance is irrelevant or unhelpful in the study of literary discourse. Similarly, he sees the quantity maxim as irrelevant, since a literary work has no practical or social function and as such, any and every literary text is too long.

In response to these objections one has to consider the levels of the discourse as well as the notion of literariness. The application of the Cooperative principle and its maxims may work differently on different levels of the discourse. Considering the dialogues, these are analogous to real-life conversation, and thus we are able to apply the maxims as in usual spoken interaction. Considering the discourse of the narrator, the matter is usually more complex. However, the real-life analogy exists too. When telling stories to each other, we function as narrators. Quite naturally, our reasons are different from those of a narrator in a novel, but otherwise the analogy seems to work. Unlike the narration of stories, for interpersonal reasons in spoken discourse, the literary discourse of a novel can clearly create an imposition upon the audience. As noted by Black (2006), the reader may or may not feel adequately rewarded for his effort. Black goes further in developing analogies and sees the relationship between the narrator and the reader as a kind of agreement: “an implied contract we all enter into when we read a fictional work: we may suspend some of our disbelief, but nevertheless we are likely to process the text in much the same way as other types of discourse, though we play the credulous reader” (Black 2006: 32). One can simply say that it is always about the reader’s choice and decision. The length of a literary text is an inherent part of its complex characteristics.

## **6 Cooperation in literary discourse: Dialogue and narrator’s discourse levels**

As pointed out in the previous section the application of the Cooperative principle and its maxims works differently on particular discourse levels. Here I want to demonstrate the application of pragmatic principles on both dialogue and narrator’s discourse levels. Consider the following example:

(2) (DL: 105)

‘You always did say you would marry for money.’

‘Yes, I did. And I am. But I wouldn’t marry him if I didn’t feel like this about him.’

‘But do you feel like this about him because he is so eligible?’ enquired Joan, laughing.

‘Probably. But what’s the matter with that?’

‘Would you marry him if he was poor?’

The sisters were now leaning forward, faces close, laughing and full of enjoyment.

The dialogue illustrates a real-life conversation, it matches our experiences with the spoken discourse and thus we are able to apply pragmatic principles and maxims as usual. The fictional setting of the short story, the particular situation (the conversation takes place in an airport restaurant) and context (two sisters are spending time together, one of them has more than an hour to catch the flight so they are just chatting, enjoying being together) provided by the narrator substitutes for the natural immediate environment necessary for understanding and interpreting literary discourse. The application of the Cooperative principle and its maxims enables us to see the close relationship between the two sisters, their amusement and enjoyment from meeting each other. Both speakers abide with the Cooperative principle and its maxims, one of them “playing” the role of an older and a more responsible sister. The statement “You always did say you would marry for money.” is an indirect speech act, an implied question, which is being answered fully to provide as exact information as possible. The response indicated an attempt to abide with the maxim of quality. The hedge “probably” in the following answer indicates that the speaker respects the maxim of quality, she wants to respond truthfully, and at the same time she shows consideration and hesitance with the answer. When the older sister asks in a more direct way, the answer is not verbalized but we understand the implied meaning—the laughing means “no”. The narrator’s notes about their reactions (laughing, enjoyment, leaning towards each other, etc.) provide important and necessary clues, which enable the reader to work out implicatures. On the one hand, the questions imply a true interest in her sister’s happiness and also different opinions about an acceptable lifestyle. On the other hand, the way both sisters communicate, how they use humour and irony as a means of cooperation, shows their close relationship. It is the younger sister who speaks in a lighter tone and turns their conversation into pure enjoyment of the time spent together.

Considering the setting and situation in literary discourse, we have to acknowledge the importance of the reader's ability to recognize shared background knowledge as well as the patterns of knowledge stored and preserved in our memory. The applicability of the frame theory is highly justified here: it enables us to see literary discourse understanding as a process of fitting what we are told into the framework established by what we already know. The notions of scripts, scenarios, and schemata allow for a relatively quick and allusive style. As observable in the above-discussed example (2), they enable us to process language quickly. We focus on the verbal exchange because the setting and situation are familiar to us (we can imagine the airport restaurant, perhaps one we visited recently; we know the scenario of a sisters' talk, etc.). In literary discourse, allusive style, ambiguous and figurative language are common, employed mainly by the narrator. The reader's perception and understanding are dependent on the amount and nature of his or her shared background knowledge, recognized scripts, scenarios, and schemata. This implies a certain relevance to the Politeness principle as well: the narrator should provide as many details, pieces of information, as necessary. Providing more information than necessary or giving over specification, might be considered as non-cooperative and impolite (the reader feels underestimated in his capacity to perceive the message correctly).

This call for an "accurate" amount of information brings us back to the notion of literariness. Certainly, the Speech Act Theory and the Cooperative Principle were not designed to (and are not able to) answer the problem of literariness. However, they help us to understand the ways texts may be processed and how we can arrive at certain interpretations. The authors of literary texts can manipulate language in interesting ways, discovering and exemplifying the potential of language. This may be one of the main reasons why we find reading (more or less allusive and open) literary texts enjoyable and rewarding.

## **7 Politeness in literary discourse: Own way and satisfactory 'face'**

The Politeness principle refers to our wish to get our own way and maintain a satisfactory public self-image or "face" (cf. Leech 1983). The application of this principle in literary discourse analysis raises objections related to the fact that literary discourse always imposes on the reader's face due to the intimate topics discussed. A simple and straightforward response is that the reader can always decide to read or not to read a particular work. However, the interpersonal element is prominent in some



novels and the relationship between narrator and reader is very important. Thus we can observe that the Politeness principle works here as in real-life situations. The author spends a lot of time addressing the reader, creating an intimate relationship with the reader. Examples are provided by literary texts, where the narrator addresses the reader directly and usually throughout the whole discourse of a novel or a short story. In literary theory, this kind of relationship between narrator and reader is called a sub-plot (Booth 1961). In the analysed collection of short stories, there is one which can serve as a good example of an intimate relationship between the narrator and the reader (*italics used in original text*):

(3) (DL: 108)

I want to tell you something, I have to tell *someone*. *I have to talk*. I suddenly understood you are the only person left who will know what I'm talking about. Has that happened to you? You suddenly think, My God, that was twenty, thirty years ago and I am the only person left who knows what really happened.

This method of directly addressing the reader continues throughout the whole short story. The final lines of the story imply the importance of talking to a close friend, for the narrator this very close and only person is the reader. The relationship becomes truly intimate, the narrator makes the reader feel special (there's no one... except you) and her concluding words imply that talking helped her and recommends the reader to do the same some time:

(4) (DL: 116) (cont.)

And there's no one I can talk to about it, no one I can tell... except you. Well, darling, do the same for you some time.

## 8 Analysing literary text as discourse

The approach of pragmatic stylistics can help us to understand all kinds of inferences involved in interpreting texts. This assumes the viewing of literary text as discourse in which particular messages are to be negotiated in the process of cooperation between the author and the reader accounting for the immediate context of situation. As illustrated by the analysed examples, the absence of a natural immediate environment (necessary for working out implicatures) can be overcome by acknowledging fictional settings, situations and contexts provided by the narrator–author of literary text. A pragmatic stylistic analysis of such compassionate and sharp-eyed stories and sketches as presented by Doris

Lessing's *London Observed* (1993) quite naturally includes considerations of the recipient's competence—his or her readiness to fully understand culture-specific messages and perceive a series of pictures of London. In this section, my aim is to demonstrate that the application of pragmatic principles and their maxims in the analysis of literary discourse can be highly beneficial to the reader. Example (5) presents a message written on one of the blackboards the Underground's staff uses to communicate their thoughts to passengers:

(5) (DL: 87)

You are probably wondering why the escalators so often aren't working?  
 We shall tell you! It is because they are old and often go out of order.  
 Sorry! Have a good day!

The discourse of this message illustrates the principles of cooperation and politeness at work: the author of the message abides by the principle of cooperation and respects the Quality maxim—he is telling the truth and in the first sentence he uses a hedge to indicate he might be wrong. He also respects the Quantity maxim and he is relevant in speech. The Manner maxim can be considered within the concept of relevance and here the point of view of the recipient is important. From the narrator's point of view, the Manner maxim holds properly—we are sorry but we can do nothing about the problem. From the point of view of the recipient, this is not a relevant explanation—I want to use escalators, I pay my ticket, and I want to have it working when rushing to work. This discussion highlights the importance of the outlined framework of the discourse, as well as of the context and situation provided by the narrator of the short story. The principle of politeness is also applicable: the message employs expressions commonly regarded as polite, such as “shall”, “sorry”, etc., and polite speech acts, such as wishing a good day. However, considering the context of the given discourse, these elements imply humour and irony. As a reader, I may find it humorous that someone who is responsible for the situation uses accusation as a form of apology. An actual real-life recipient of the message, i.e. the underground passenger, would probably perceive it as ironic and impolite, and even face threatening. The example illustrates that humour often overlaps with irony. Unlike humour, irony does not always create laughter. It can be appreciated by recipients if they share the same point of view. Example (2) discussed above shows that the recipients who share the same point of view can perceive humour and even appreciate irony. The sisters were flattered, entertained and amused because the irony used by the older sister was kind and did not develop

into sarcasm. In other words, her questions did not cause offence and remained as what is usually called friendly mocking (cf. Leech 1983).

## 9 Leech's conception of interpersonal rhetoric

An interesting approach to interpersonal rhetoric seeks to apply the hierarchical model of pragmatic principles to the description of English (Leech 1983: 79). The Cooperative and Politeness principles are regarded as first-order principles and seen in interaction when interpreting indirectness. The Irony and Banter principles are regarded as higher-order principles and are identified to complete the hierarchy. In addition to these traditionally discussed principles, Leech proposes another two, the Interest and Pollyanna principles. The Interest principle is regarded as a conversational principle which underlies cases of overstatement in ordinary conversation (see examples (6) and (7) below). This principle embodies the force, which makes us "say what is unpredictable, and hence interesting" (Leech 1983: 147). Additional pragmatically relevant aspects of literary discourse can be observed when considering the Pollyanna hypothesis, which states that "people will prefer to look on the bright side rather than on the gloomy side of life" (Leech 1983: 147). Interpreting it in the communicative framework of a real-life spoken discourse would mean that participants in a conversation will prefer pleasant topics of conversation to unpleasant ones. Considering the framework of literary discourse, where the range of topics may vary (especially on the narrator's level), this hypothesis will probably not work. However, looking at the dialogues, which can be seen as parallels of real-life conversations, the Pollyanna principle may work in the same way as in spoken discourse. Some evidence can be found in example (2) above, where the response "Probably. But what's the matter with that?" indicates that the speaker does not want to discuss details and chooses to ignore potential negatives of her attitude. The Irony principle is parasitic on the Cooperative and Politeness principles in the sense that it enables the speaker to be impolite while seeming to be polite. As observable in the following example, irony is an apparently friendly way of being offensive—the Cooperative and Politeness principles are not violated:

(6) (DL: 106)

'Well, I can't afford it, I don't have the money, but Oliver can and he'll pay for me.'

Joan smiled. 'Certainly one way making him responsible for you.'

The ways the speakers employ humour and irony vary according to a number of interpersonal reasons they aim to achieve in communication. In this final section of my paper, I wish to discuss some aspects of interactional humour and irony as observed in the analysed material.

## **10 Irony and humour as means of cooperation and dissociation**

Irony as a friendly way of being offensive (mock-politeness) as well as humour, which causes laughing and enjoyment, can enhance mutual interaction and provide a floor for cooperation in communication. Humour helps to raise interest and helps the speaker appeal to the listener. In example (2) discussed above, the two sisters cooperate in their conversation via humour and slight irony, the older sister politely mocking the younger one. Cooperative humour and irony imply close and intimate relationships between the interlocutors.

Irony and humour often serve other purposes, they may function as a means of dissociation of the speaker from the topic of conversation. In the next example, the passer-by pronounces an ironic utterance in a way which shows the absurdity of discussing an intimate topic aloud in a public place. He uses humour and irony to dissociate himself from the topic as well as from their loud talk. The assumption is that the speaker does not really mean what he says and thus we can say that irony arises from breaking the Quality maxim of the Cooperative principle. What looks like a polite offering of help is actually a mock-politeness, a clear case of irony. To avoid misunderstanding and/or offence irony must be clearly recognizable as unserious:

(7) (DL: 107)

no, anytime, a pleasure!

More precisely, irony typically takes the form of being too obviously polite for the occasion. In the example above, the speaker overvalues the Politeness principle by blatantly breaking a maxim of the Cooperative principle, the Quality maxim, in order to uphold the Politeness principle. In other words, what the speaker says is polite to the hearer and it is clearly not true. Therefore, what the speaker really means is impolite to the hearer and true. This example clearly illustrates that in being polite, one is often faced with a clash between the Cooperative and the Politeness principle. Both Grice (1975) and Leech (1983) acknowledge this phenomenon. Leech refers to it as “trading off” one principle against the other and he further specifies

that in being ironic, one exploits the Politeness principle in order to uphold the Cooperative principle (Leech 1983: 82).

## 11 Conclusions

On a range of different levels, texts can be studied in the light of the Cooperative and Politeness principles with some benefit. A pragmatic stylistic approach, based on the interface between stylistics and pragmatics, allows us to explain how it is that we have arrived at a particular interpretation of literary discourse. The application of main pragmatic principles and categories to literary discourse analysis adds another dimension to the (until now predominantly semantic) study of such complex phenomena as humour and irony. Since humour and irony arise from the interplay between the utterance and a particular situation, their understanding involves inferential processes, highly dependent on the nature of the shared background knowledge, frames and schemata related to provided environment, settings, contexts and situations. Similarly, we can explain why we come to certain views via the implicatures we access.

A variety of objections raised against the application of pragmatic principles to literary discourse analysis focus on “literariness”, allusive style and non-transparent language used in literary discourse. As shown by sample analyses, these objections are debatable and most of them can be clarified (more or less) easily. In general, pragmatic principles enhanced by the frame theory can be successfully applied within the process of analysing literary/written discourse. As for the notion of literary language, the competent reader is likely to appreciate its allusive style, and many times will experience more enjoyment in it than when used in a fully transparent manner.

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