Understanding a Short Story: The Roles of Linguistic Features and Encyclopedic Knowledge

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Abstract

This paper claims that to understand literary works, readers rely not only on linguistic features but also on encyclopedic knowledge, or the knowledge of the world. In Edgar Allen Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," such linguistic features as structural parallelism and verbal parallelism constitute an act of encoding which invites the reader to interpret. At the same time, contemporary works show the influence of fear on the human mind, enhancing the reader's understanding. For example, John Conolly's work illustrates how fear is related to the inability to distinguish between imagination and reality. By referring to Conolly's work, readers realized the protagonist is victimized by fear.

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้แสดงว่าการที่จะเข้าใจงานวรรณกรรม ผู้อ่านมิได้ให้ความสำคัญกับคุณสมบัติต่าง ๆ ทางภาษาศาสตร์เท่านั้น แต่ยังอาศัยความรู้ทั่วไปเกี่ยวกับโลกด้วย กรณีเรื่องสั้นของ Edgar Allen Poe เรื่อง "The Tell-Tale Heart" ลักษณะต่าง ๆ ทางภาษาศาสตร์ เช่น โครงสร้างขนาน หรือการซ้ำคำ ทำให้ผู้อ่านต้องพยายามตีความหาสาเหตุว่าทำไมผู้เขียนจึงใช้เทคนิคการเขียนเช่นนั้น ในขณะเดียวกันงานเขียนอื่นที่ผลิตขึ้นในเวลาเดียวกับเรื่องสั้นเรื่องนี้แสดงให้เห็นถึงอิทธิพลของความกลัวที่มีต่อสภาพจิตใจของมนุษย์ทำให้ผู้อ่านเข้าใจเรื่องสั้นเรื่องนี้ได้ดีขึ้น

เช่น งานของจอห์น คอนอลลี่ แสดงให้เห็นว่าความกลัวทำให้ตัวละครเอกในเรื่องไม่สามารถแยกแยะระหว่างจินตนาการและความจริง เมื่อผู้อ่านอ่านงานของคอนอลลี่ก็จะทราบว่าตัวละครเอกมีปัญหาเรื่องความกลัว

Introduction

Schema, also called the "building block of cognition" (Rumelhart, 1980), is a significant notion in understanding the knowledge structure of our brains. What we know exists as schemata hierarchies and this prior knowledge is activated when we encounter new information. Rumelhart defines schema as follows:

> A schema theory is basically a theory about... how knowledge is presented and about how that representation facilitates the use of the knowledge in particular ways. According to schema theories, all knowledge is packaged into units... [called] schemata. Embedded in these packets of knowledge is... information about how this knowledge is to be used (Rumelhart, 1980: 34)

In the same vein, Widdowson (1979) claims that reading efficiency cannot be measured against the amount of information contained in a text. This cannot be calculated because one's reading efficiency depends on how much knowledge one brings to the text and how much one wishes to extract from it. Rather, reading efficiency is a matter of how effectively the reader can create a discourse from the text. The effectiveness depends on the rapport with the writer or the reader's purpose in engaging in the discourse in the first place.

In the case of literary works, readers try to make sense of texts, by paying attention to the linguistic structure and making use of encyclopedic knowledge, which includes knowledge of the world (Fowlor, 1996). This paper will investigate how linguistic background and encyclopedic knowledge can help the reader understand literary works.

Linguistic Background

Edgar Allen Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," is a clear example of how foregrounding draws the readers' attention to its own artifices of construction—cohesion becomes itself a pattern for independent notice. One reason why this particular narration calls for the reader's active interpretation is the unreliable narrator. According to Genette (1980), a narrator is the speaker or "voice" of the narrative discourse. He is the agent who establishes communicative contact with an addressee. He manages the exposition and decides *what* is to be told, *how* it is to be told and *what* is to be *left out*. The reader is sensitized to the unfamiliarity of the narration because its structure violates the conditions of the illocutionary act of making statements. Let's look at the beginning of the short story:

> TRUE! NERVOUS, very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad?... How then am I mad? ... Now this is the point. You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen *me*. (Poe, 1843: 3)

The narrator insists most emphatically that he is sane. By this utterance at the beginning of the story, a normal man would be assured that his addressee knows already that he is not mad. However, the narrator conveys his concern that the addressee may "misunderstand." This is a reason why he repeats his assertion in the following examples:

> And now have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over-acuteness of the senses? ...
> If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body. (Poe, 1843: 5-6)

According to one appropriate condition of the illocutionary act[1] of making a statement, an utterance that a speaker makes should

not be the one that the addressee knows already (or the one that the addressee does not need to be reminded of.) This condition represents a rule which users of the language assume to be in force in their verbal dealings with each other. It is a part of the knowledge that speakers of a language share and on which they rely in order to use the language correctly and effectively. Poe's narrator does not seem to be capable of observing this rule at all. Since the reader actively reconstructs the literary discourse in accordance with his expectation, making use of his encyclopedic knowledge, he suspects that the narrator's mentality must be different from that of ordinary men, a suspicion which is to be vindicated at the end of the short story.

The repetition also violates Grice's maxim of quantity[2]: a speaker should not make his contribution more informative than is required because the addressee will be offended that the former does not respect his intelligence. In this short story, Grice's maxim of manner is also violated. Let's look at the following example, in which the narrator tells the reader why he is killing the victim:

> It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain, but, once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this! (Poe, 1843: 3)

The narrator does not come to the point immediately as is expected in a normal exchange. However, he keeps talking about what is not his purpose. The reason why this part of the narration stands out to the reader is Poe's cohesive devices. He makes use of parallel structures in the following sentences: Object **there was none.** Passion **there was none**. And **He had never** wronged me. **He had never** given me insult. Poe chooses to use negative sentences in the

parallel structures, helping create curiosity. The first affirmative sentence which follows the pair of negative sentences is what the reader is looking for: the reason for the narrator's murder of the old man. In this way, a pattern is set up and then it is broken, making the reason stand out to the reader. The sanity of the narrator is also questioned by the reader because his narration violates the latter's expectation.

In addition to structural parallelism, one of the most important cohesive devices employed extensively in this story is verbal repetition. During the first seven nights, the narrator plans to kill the old man, but does not because the victim's eye is closed. Let's look at how the narrator's visits are described:

> I turned the latch of his door and opened it oh, so gently! And then, when I had made an opening sufficient for my head, I put in a dark lantern **all closed, closed** so that no light shone out, and then I thrust in my head. Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in! I moved it **slowly, very, very slowly,** so that I might not disturb the old man's sleep. It took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening so far that I could see him as he lay upon his bed. Ha! would a madman have been so wise as this? And then when my head was well in the room I undid the lantern **cautiously -- oh, so cautiously -- cautiously** (for the hinges creaked), ... (Poe, 1843: 3-4)

In addition to his odd reason as to why he does not kill the man, along with the slowness of his action, the verbal repetition helps signify that the narrator is obsessed with his action, implying that he is not mentally healthy. Poe seems to consider that the use of verbal repetition can create a pattern which shows the narrator's mental problems because he uses it extensively in his description of the eighth night, the night of the murder:

> Meantime the hellish tattoo of the heart increased. It grew **quicker and quicker,** and **louder and louder,** every instant. The old man's terror must have been extreme! It grew **louder**, I say, **louder** every moment! -- do you mark me well? I have told you that I am nervous: so I am. And now at the dead hour of the night, amid the dreadful silence of that old house, so strange a noise as this excited me to uncontrollable terror. Yet, for some minutes longer I refrained and stood still. But the beating grew **louder, louder!**
> (Poe, 1843: 6)

The narrator's great concern over the sound of his victim's heart is emphasized by the use of verbal repetition. Here, it seems that role of the sight has decreased, paving the way for the dominance of the sense of hearing, which will be very important to what happens in the last scene and to the narrator's destiny.

In the last scene, the techniques of structural parallelism and verbal repetition play a very crucial role because they help signify the mental condition of the narrator, which leads to his confession of homicide:

> Yet the sound increased -- and what could I do? It was *a low, dull, quick sound - much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton.* I gasped for breath, and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly, more vehemently but **the noise steadily increased.** I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with violent gesticulations; but **the noise steadily increased**. Why *would* they not be gone? I paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observations of the men, but ***the noise* steadily increased.** O God! what *could* I do? I foamed -- I raved -- I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards, but **the noise arose over all and continually increased**. It grew **louder -- louder -- *louder!*** And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God! -- no, no? **They** heard! -- **they** suspected! -- **they** knew! -- they were making a mockery of my horror! -- this I thought, and this I think. But anything was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die! -- and now -- again -- hark! **louder! louder! louder!** *louder!* - (Poe, 1843: 7, italics original)

An important pattern is created in this scene: the fact that "the noise steadily increased" is repeated. Between them, Poe fills the gaps with actions which indicate that the narrator is insane, such as pacing the floor to and fro with heavy strides, foaming, raving or swearing. The most important action which shows that the narrator cannot control himself is the fact that he swings the chair he is sitting on and grates it upon the board, because he is now in front of the police and his action arouses their suspicion that the victim's body may be under the board. The verbal repetition of the word "louder" also signifies the protagonist's derangement since the victim is already dead and there cannot be a heartbeat.

The structural parallelism and the verbal parallelism constitute an act of encoding which invites the reader to interpret. According to Roman Jakobson, for the audience to decode the message, a context is required and it must be seizable by a code, fully or partially common to the addresser and the addressee. Here, it seems that the parallel structure suggests the obsession about his action in the protagonist's mind. At one point in the story, the narrator confesses that the murder leads him to a great fear:

> And now at the dead hour of the night, amid the dreadful silence of that old house, so strange a noise as this excited me to uncontrollable terror. (Poe, 1843: 8)

Thus, because of his fear, he cannot control his behavior when he thinks that he hears the noises of the victim's heartbeat. In this way, Poe implies that sounds often produce anxiety. Poe relies on the misgivings produced by insanity, and certain loud sounds to terrify his audience with the actions of a diseased mind.

Encyclopedic background

In many of Poe's works, fear plays a key role. His horror short stories explore the dark, ominous realm of fear. Horribly intense, fear is an innate emotion rooted deep in the mind. Along with love, hate, anger and joy, fear resides in the depths of our beings and often plays a crucial role in determining our beliefs and actions. Poe addresses the nature of fear and its influence upon us. Poe's fiction of fear acutely examines man's mind.

Through his acquaintance with such contemporary works as Benjamin Rush's *Medical inquiries and Observation Upon the Diseases of the Mind*, published in 1812 (cited by Hyneman, 1968), Poe familiarized himself with the notion of fear recorded by this early scholar of American psychology. Such contact with psychological treatises helps shape Poe's perspectives regarding fear and madness. He learns what scares the nineteenth-century readers and he knows how to please them. To discover the nature of such fears, let's look at the key notion of this book.

Rush sees a strong connection between fear and madness; the person controlled by fear becomes to a greater or lesser degree mentally deranged. Infected thoughts cloud a patient's perceptions as understanding deteriorates. Here, we can see the similarity between Rush's notion and the short story's protagonist. The narrator is mad and his fear about his crime leads to his revelation of his own guilt. In addition, Rush believes that fear influences mental and physical processes. When respiration or heartbeat increases in the face of danger, the mind often cannot rationally view the stress-producing scene. In "the Tell-tale Heart," the narrator does not seem to be aware of the imminent danger although the police are there.

In addition to Benjamin Rush, John Conolly published *An Inquiry Concerning the Indications of Insanity* in 1830 (cited by Hyneman, 1968). In it, he sees a strong connection between fear and the inability to distinguish between imagination and reality. Thus, a man who is overcome by fear, "cannot compare one circumstance with another...he waits to be destroyed or he does what hastens his destruction; he is, for the time deprived of reason." The protagonist of "The Tell-tale Heart" cannot differentiate between imagination and reality:

> My head ached, and I fancied a ringing in my ears; but still they sat, and still chatted. The ringing became more distinct: I talked more freely to get rid of the feeling: but it continued and gained definitiveness (Poe, 1843: 7)

The word "fancied" signifies that the sound he is hearing comes from his imagination, yet he lets himself to be victimized by it. Although the scene does not indicate that the murder has taken place, he gives way to his fear and reveals himself as the murderer.

In conclusion, the reader's linguistic background plays a crucial role in determining "literary competence." However, encyclopedia knowledge is also helpful to the reader. After all, a "super reader" refers to a reader with "a store of his historical philological and cultural reference," knowledge which guides him through literary works.

Notes

[1] According to Austin (1962), the illocutionary act, is an act performed ***in*** saying something. Examples of illocutionary act include asserting, suggesting, promising, and vowing.

[2] Grice's cooperative principle refers to a set of norms expected in conversation. Grice proposes four maxims expected in conversation.

- quality: speaker tells the truth or provable by adequate evidence
- quantity: speaker is as informative as required
- relation: response is relevant to topic of discussion
- manner: speaker avoids ambiguity or obscurity, is direct and straightforward

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