

## On the meta-structures of literary discourse

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Corresponding to every level of discourse there is a meta-level which concerns itself with the first level. The relationships between levels and metalevels characterize many of the epistemological structures of modern science, and in fact form one of the fundamental characteristics of semiotics in general. Within the realm of language, no matter what level or plane is considered, it is possible to define a metalevel which takes this plane or level as its object of interest. Without this definability, it would be impossible to recognize the disciplines of linguistics and general semiotics, or even the simple teaching of language and rhetoric. In the realm of literature, the dichotomy between levels and metalevels plays an important rôle in the works of many authors and, among other things, makes possible such devices as narrative discourse and indirect speech.

The purpose of the present study is briefly to enumerate some of the possible semiotic structures characterizing literary texts, and their significance to the interpretation of such texts. In particular, attention will be directed at the various ways in which metasemiotic structures may be introduced into literature, with the aim of laying some of the groundwork for a typology of literary semiotics in general<sup>1</sup>. The results of such a study are by no means exhaustive, but serve to illustrate some of the general uses of metalanguage in literature, as well as providing further insight into the semiotic structures of particular works. Being programmatic in intent, this brief study seeks only to suggest the possible significance of the structures in question, since the current limits of literary semiotics preclude any definitive conclusions.

Webster's Dictionary offers, for one of the definitions of the prefix *meta-*, the following: 'more comprehensive . . . transcending . . . used with the name of a discipline to designate a new but related discipline designed to deal critically with the original one (*metalanguage*)'. Thus, in its most general sense, metalanguage is merely speaking about language, in some critical fashion. This definition, however, is inadequate to the needs at hand, since it is quite vague and leaves a number of critical terms undefined. More specifically, the skeletal definition of metalanguage leaves unexplained the precise nature of the relationship between "language", whatever that word might mean, and "metalanguage"; i. e., what differentiates the substance of language from that of metalanguage.

In a well-known study<sup>2</sup>, Roman Jakobson presented a comprehensive definition of the speech act, which may be roughly summarized as: a sender sends a message to a receiver about a context (referent) along a channel utilizing a linguistic code. Corresponding to each of these six components of the linguistic act are six different type-forms of linguistic discourse, each of which places primary emphasis on a different component. Emotive language, including its purest form, the interjection, emphasizes the point of view of the sender. Conative language emphasizes the rôle of the receiver, and includes vocative locutions. Phatic discourse tests the operation of the channel and includes such meaningless remarks as 'do you understand me?'. Referential language, accounting for the majority of 'neutral' discourse, emphasizes the referent or context of the message. Poetic language places greatest emphasis on the form of the message itself. Finally, metalanguage directs attention to the *code*

in which the message is sent. As defined by Jakobson, metalanguage may assume many forms. The simplest examples occur when asking someone to repeat or explain something he has said, or when paraphrasing an utterance. Similarly, definitions and instructions as to how to use the language fall within the category of metalingual operations.

The range of Jakobson's definitions permit one to view the rôle of metalanguage against the background of the entire linguistic act. As was the case with the preceding definition, however, there is no elucidation of the fundamental difference in levels between language and metalanguage<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, Jakobson notes that there is hardly any discourse, with the exception of such forms as interjections and onomatopoeic words, which employs only a single component of the speech act; thus, there is no indication of which, if any, of the categories are mutually exclusive, nor whether separate levels need to be defined in order to accommodate all the components involved. Jakobson's model is as it were two-dimensional, providing a planar view of the various components comprising the speech act, without considering the additional dimension(s) required to portray the multilevel nature of human semiotic behavior. In order to address these questions, we must turn away from the specific study of human language and toward the more general science of signs.

The founder of modern semiotics, Ferdinand de Saussure<sup>4</sup>, regarded the sign as a bipartite entity: the signified, or that to which the sign refers, and the signifier, or the external manifestations of the sign. This dichotomy roughly corresponds to the linguistic division between meaning and form, although the exactness of this correspondence is not universally accepted<sup>5</sup>. The sign is thus a dynamic process of signification, and it is impossible to speak of a sign without referring to each of its two inseparable components.

Saussure's theory was further refined and elaborated by Louis Hjelmslev<sup>6</sup>, who defined the sign (sign-function) as a dialectical opposition between a plane of expression and a plane of content. As with Saussure's definition of the sign, each of the two planes in Hjelmslev's definition may be characterized only in opposition to the other. Hjelmslev subsequently considered more complex sign-systems, in which the plane of expression, or content, or both, is in itself composed of a signifying system. When the expression plane of a signifying system is itself a signifying system, we may speak of a connotative semiotic. In such a complex system the linguistic signs which form part of the expression plane of the overall system act as signifiers for elements in the content plane of the matrix system, and thus, in a certain sense, transcend their own value. On the other hand, when the content plane of a signifying system is constituted by a signifying system, we have a metasemiotic or metalanguage. These notions have been further discussed by Roland Barthes<sup>7</sup>, who suggested the following symbolism: a signifying system consists of a plane of expression *E* and a plane of content *C* united by a relation *R*; thus, each signifying system may be represented as *ERC*. Turning to the complex systems discussed above, it is seen that a connotative semiotic is represented as

(1) (ERC) R C

while a metasemiotic is of the form

(2) E R (ERC).

54 The Hjelmslev / Barthes definition of metalanguage adds a potentially significant dimension to the field of literary analysis, for it offers a ready schematization of the

various levels of discourse, while explicitly portraying the individual levels involved. Inherent in such a definition is the potential for forming semiotic systems of an arbitrarily high degree of complexity, by means of embedding signifying systems in the content or expression planes of other signifying systems. Moreover, to the complex semiotic patterns which may be found in existing literary works, an additional degree of complexity may be added either by critical discussion (i. e. metalanguage), or by a consideration of the connotative values. Remaining within the scope of metalanguage, it is apparent that given any literary text, there is an endless ascending chain of metalevels whose kernel is that text, and the analyst faces the methodological question of where along this chain to terminate the discussion. Hjelmslev notes, in this connection<sup>8</sup>, that 'from considerations of appropriateness we must so organize metasemiology that in practice its object is distinct from that of semiology; and we must behave correspondingly in the face of eventual metasemiologies of higher order and not add further metasemiologies of higher order whose objects would be no different from those already treated'.

In a similar fashion, there is an endless chain of connotative levels which result from the expansion of a given text. There is, in theory, no rule of thumb to be followed when dealing with such complex semiotic systems, for the question is ultimately a philosophical one. In practice, however, there is usually no difficulty, for each investigation has its own goals, which can be met through the consideration of a clearly delimited number of levels of discourse.

Before continuing on to some concrete examples, it is useful to consider some basic properties of literary texts in general, in a purely axiomatic fashion. First of all, it will be asserted that every literary text, whatever its nature, is part of a connotative semiotic<sup>9</sup>. This may, in fact, be taken as a fundamental characteristic of "literary" discourse, which in effect transcends the purely referential value inherent in the communicative function of language by adding additional dimensions of significance. Thus, even the simplest literary text may be represented as

(3) (ERC) R C

where the left-hand signifying system which forms the expression plane of the matrix system is the language of the text. The content plane of the matrix system is the set of connotations generated by the literary text.

As a further consideration, it will be claimed that, in cases where a narrative dialogue is embedded in a literary text, this configuration constitutes an additional connotative semiotic; i. e., that the narrative dialogue forms the expression plane for a larger semiotic system. Since the narrator (author) is in effect reporting the speech of his characters, the dialogue must be situated on a different plane of discourse from the remainder of the narrative. Given that the narrative dialogue, being itself a literary language, is also a connotative semiotic, as is the entire literary text in which it is embedded, the existence of narrative dialogue gives rise to a configuration of greater complexity, such as:

(4) [(ERC) R C] R C

The above structures, being constant in all literary texts are of no special significance to individual studies, but merely form the background for more specific observations.

One of the simplest and most common examples of metalanguage occurring in literature is found on those occasions when the author intervenes to offer a

commentary on the language of his personages. Such commentary may be directed at any or all components of the characters' speech: phonological, syntactic, semantic, sociolinguistic, etc. As an example of the first category, consider the following excerpt from the novel *V* by Thomas Pynchon<sup>10</sup>:

"Benny. How is the pimping business, hyeugh, hyeugh." The laugh could only have come from Profane's onetime shipmate, Pig Bodine . . . Hyeugh, hyeugh approximates a laugh formed by putting the tongue-tip under the top central incisors and squeezing guttural sounds out of the throat. It was, as Pig intended, horribly obscene.

Or again, a description of the use of Spanish diminutive forms, in *-ito*, found in a Latin American novel<sup>11</sup>:

"I might buy myself some *calcetincitos* [socks] so that the *zapatitos* [shoes] would look better, all *limpiecitos* [clean]", convinced that by thinking or speaking in diminutives, everything is easier, more permitted, that even the most humble submission is neutralized by the appropriate diminutive; God himself even comes down . . . if he's called on with the right diminutive.

Such metalinguistic reflections on the part of the narrator/author serve to introduce an additional level into the semiotic structure of the text by situating the narrative dialogue as the content plane of a metasemiotic whose expression plane is represented by the author's own commentaries. Schematically, this may be shown as:

(5)                    E   R   [(ERC)   R   C]   R   C

Since the characters' language constitutes a literary connotative semiotic, as do the narrator's own commentaries, it is necessary to consider the additional plane of connotation. This usage of metalanguage is one of the primary uses of metalanguage in literature, as noted by Jakobson.

Also commonly exemplified within literary works are cases where characters discuss their own language. This meta-dialogue may occur in several different forms. In the most straightforward cases, a personage may simply comment concerning his own speech, or that of another character. Consider the following passage<sup>12</sup>, concerning the use of the Spanish familiar pronouns *tú* (general in Spanish) and the more colloquial *vos* (found in certain parts of Latin America), as opposed to the formal pronoun *usted*:

"Salvado, last time I told you to call me *tú*. I call you *vos*. Why don't you do the same to me? To me you seem offensive and brusque and it irritates me."

"I just can't get used to it," Salvado replied amiably. "Let's reach an agreement. You call me *tú* or *vos* as you like, and I'll keep on calling you *usted*."

"We'll never be able to reach a true cordiality and understanding, just because of that," said Espinoza, very seriously.

"Don't you believe it," said Salvado. "I appreciate and get along better with people who don't press me too closely."

56 Another rather unusual type of meta-dialogue occurs on those occasions in which grammatical forms are explicitly commented on by the characters themselves. In

the linguistically fertile novel *Zazie dans le Métro*, by Raymond Queneau, we are presented with a dialogue involving the policeman Trouzcaillon and Fédor Balanovitch, in which the former commits errors with regard to the simple preterite tense or *passé simple*:

"Then do you authorize me to formulate once again the interrogative proposition that a few minutes ago I enunciated [*j'énonça*] in your presence?"

"*J'énonçai*, said the stranger.

"*J'énonçais*, said Trouzcaillon.

"*J'énonçai*, without an *s*".

"*J'énonçai*, said Trouzcaillon at last. "Ah! Grammar is just too much for me."

This passage is singularly interesting, for it admits of interpretation on a number of different levels. First of all, the remarks may be regarded as a mere grammatical correction. It is to be noted, however, that the simple preterite tense, while essential to literary French, is rarely used in common Parisian speech, thus rendering such a dialogue highly unlikely right from the outset, and adding an element of humor while also adding to Queneau's campaign to reform the French language. Moreover, the situation becomes somewhat vertiginous if one pauses to consider that in spoken Parisian French, the opposition between /*ε*/ (represented by the first person singular of the imperfect, spelled *-ais*) and /*e*/ (as in the first person singular of the simple preterite, spelled *-ai*) has all but disappeared<sup>13</sup>. Thus, the logical conclusion to be drawn is that the (spoken) dialogue concerns a purely orthographic distinction! This same effect of adding a separate, parallel, level of orthographic structure to the metalinguistic discussion, occurs elsewhere in the same novel, for example when Trouzcaillon proclaims *je suis libre comme l'r* 'I'm as free as the air', where the letter *r* and the word *aire* are homophonous.

A situation in which the characters, through their dialogue, discuss their own speech, gives rise to an additional level of metalanguage, and the resulting semiotic structure thus becomes:

(6)                    [E   R (ERC)] R C R C

In such a configuration, it is only the entire dialogue between the characters, not the language which they are discussing, which is considered as properly "literary"; i. e., which gives rise to a connotational semiotic, although strictly speaking, every form of language engenders certain connotations. For the purposes of our analysis, however, these may be disregarded.

The textual involution engendered by metasemiotic structures is not confined to situations involving the language of the characters, but may also occur with more general semiotic configurations, as when the personages actually play an active rôle in the unfolding of the narrative, by reading or talking about events described in the text, which concern themselves as elements embedded in that text. This has become a favorite device among science-fiction writers, where a character will travel in time and meet 'himself', as it were, on a different level. It also occurs when characters 'step out' of the narrative and discuss their rôle as characters in the text, as in the works of Pirandello, Miguel de Unamuno (*Niebla*), and also in the novel *Abaddón el Exterminador* by the Argentine Ernesto Sábato, where the author, himself a character in the novel, discusses with various characters their respective rôles in this and earlier novels. The same situation also occurs in the novel *Cien Años de Soledad* [100 Years of Solitude] by the Columbian Gabriel García Márquez, where Aureliano Buendía reads the text written 100 years before by the Gypsy

Melquíades, which describes all the events which are to happen to the former's family during that century, including Aureliano's reading of the manuscript at that precise moment. A further example is found in the story "Continuidad de Parques" 'Continuity of Parks' by the Argentine Julio Cortázar, in which the sole character sits reading a story about a murder in which it turns out he is to be the victim. In such cases, the structure given in (6) still holds, but with somewhat different defining characteristics: the content plane of the embedded metasemiotic is no longer the characters' language, but more generally, some aspect of the characters themselves, which has come up for discussion in the text.

The relationship between narrator's language and characters' language may be warped in yet another way, when the narrator / author indirectly reports the thoughts or speech of the characters using their own speech style woven directly into the narrative stream. To consider another example from *Zazie dans le Métro*, we have the following fragment of dialogue:

"Oh, don't bug me! I'm in a bad mood."  
 "And don't ya think you should let the others know?"  
 That's true, that is; hell, he hadn't even thought of it.

In the passage the narrator/author reproduces, in the last sentence, the addressee's thoughts indirectly, by employing his own style of colloquial French speech [c'est vrai, ça, merde, il y avait pas pensé].

Other examples may be more subtle, as when Julio Cortázar, in his novel *Rayuela* [*Hopscotch*], inserts the silent letter *b* before words beginning with a vowel during a passage dealing with a characters' drunkenness, thus suggesting both the orthographic and phonetic difficulties associated with that state:

And although (H)Oliveira mistrusted drunkenness [(h) ebrieded], the (h) astute accomplice of the Great Deception [(h) engaño], something told him that there was kibbutz there . . .

Such reflections need not even be metalinguistic, but may be of a more general metasemiotic nature, as in the following fragment, narrated in the first person by a bongo player in a Havana nightclub<sup>14</sup>:

I kept on playing and playing I saw Arsenio Cué call the waiter and ask for the check playing and playing wake up Silvestre and I saw the black writer get up and start to leave holding Vivian and Sibil by the arm and playing Cué was paying enough all by himself and playing the waiter returned and Cué gave him a tip playing that judging by the waiter's satisfied face must have been good playing and I saw him leave too and join the others at the door and the bellboy open the curtains and playing they left through the red and green and well-lighted gambling room and the curtain fell behind them playing. They didn't even tell me good bye. But I didn't care because I was playing and I kept on playing and I was still going to keep on playing for a good while.

In cases such as the ones reported above, there occurs a rearrangement of the semiotic structure of the text, for the level of narrative dialogue has been excised. In its place, we find an additional plane of connotation, formed by the speech, thoughts or actions of the characters, which serves as the content plane for a signifying system whose expression plane is the narrative itself. The overall structure of the text at these points thus becomes:

where the leftmost embedded signifying system represents the language of the text, the one to the right of it is the connotational language, that is, the language or behavior of the characters, and the matrix system is the connotative semiotic represented by the literary text itself. This additional level of connotation is required since, albeit indirectly, the author is letting his characters speak of think within the confines of the narrative, thus removing such indirect speech from the overall level of the text.

As a further example of the manipulation of semiotic levels in literary works we may cite the incorporation of various stylistic codes or levels of language directly into the narrative, not as part of a dialogue structure. It is very frequent for authors to write in a colloquial, familiar, archaic, or other well-defined style throughout the expanse of a text, thus providing a paragon example of a connotative semiotic in action, with the connotations of style being added to the other connotations engendered by the work, as illustrated in (3). Less frequently encountered, and perhaps as a consequence more striking, are those instances where the author rapidly juxtaposes examples of various stylistic registers within the same stretch of narrative, thus providing a constant shifting of connotational perspective. This device occurs very frequently in the works of Raymond Queneau, particularly in *Zazie dans le Métro*, where examples of popular or colloquial French suddenly pop up in the midst of a perfectly normal stretch of 'literary' French, only to be followed again by the more formal style<sup>15</sup>. It also plays a key rôle in the works of Alfred Jarry, particularly in *Ubu Roi*, where the constant shifting between modern and archaic styles<sup>16</sup>, and between familiar and formal levels of address<sup>17</sup>, contribute to the wildly oscillating character of the play.

In addition to providing a single connotation such as 'vulgar' or 'archaic' it is possible for the incorporation of differing speech styles directly into the narrative to connote an entire language in itself; as for example when Queneau uses a linguistic device suggestive of colloquial spoken French, which, in addition to the connotation 'colloquial', actually connotes the entirety of this style of speech. In such cases, the following structure results:

where the left-hand signifying system represents the language of the text while the right-hand system is the entirety of the semiotic system connoted by the text. Thus the text, at these instances, is at once a metasemiotic and a connotative semiotic, and the overall complexity of the structure has been reduced through the elimination of the level of speech of the characters<sup>18</sup>.

The meaning of a literary text is a function of the various levels comprising that text, and of the interrelationships between these levels. Consequently, in order to extract the meaning of a particular text, it must be approached via the individual semiotic levels of which it is composed. The study of connotation has traditionally formed part of the stock in trade of the literary analyst, albeit not necessarily within a rigorous semiological framework. Metalanguage, on the other hand, has received comparatively little attention. This is possibly due to the fact that in a metasemiotic, both the plane of content and the plane of expression are generally explicitly manifested in the text, while in a connotative semiotic, the content plane, or set of connotations, usually remains outside the realm of the text itself, and consequently accounts for the self-transcendental nature of literary texts. On the other hand, self-

transcendence is not the only means by which literary complexity may be achieved: the self-involution engendered by meta-discourse embedded within the text also adds dimensions which have heretofore been treated in the most cursory fashion. The structuralist notion of *isotopy*<sup>19</sup>, effective in the study of connotation and textual coherence, may also be extended to the search for kernels of metalinguistic convergence, as for example when all the remarks concerning spoken French found in *Zazie dans le Métro* form an isotopy dealing with the overall evolution of the French language.

Since both connotative and meta-semiotics can give rise to structures with an arbitrarily high degree of complexity, it is fitting that both configurations receive their rightful acknowledgement within the field of literary semantics. Moreover, given that metasemiotic configurations are almost invariably contained within the text proper, this leads to the sort of self-limiting required of a scientific and objective approach to the study of literature, which is often lacking in the virtually boundless realm of connotation.

The foregoing discussion was not intended to be an exhaustive characterization of metalanguage as used in literature, but rather as an elucidation of some of the complex structural patterns to be found among literary works. The possibility for several semiotic structures to exist concurrently within the same text has been noted, but further areas nevertheless remain to be explored, for among the myriad complex semiotic structures to be found in literature and the arts in general, only a handful have been discussed to date. In particular, in the preceding paragraphs, the connotative level was, except in a few cases, taken to be an indivisible entity; i. e., the content plane of a signifying system. In many cases, however, only a few of which have been illustrated above, the connotative plane may in itself be a signifying system, possibly of great internal complexity. The present study is offered only as a first step towards the establishment of a grammar (or metagrammar) which will generate the infinite set of semiotic structures which may characterize literary language.

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#### FOOTNOTES:

- <sup>1</sup> The need for such a typology is noted by A. J. Greimas in *Du Sens* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970), p. 95.
- <sup>2</sup> Roman Jakobson, 'Closing statement: linguistics and poetics'. In *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge: M. I. T. Press, 1960), pp. 350 — 449.
- <sup>3</sup> For some further critical remarks, see J. Lipski, 'Spanish *carajo*: problems and proposals', forthcoming in *Orbis*.
- <sup>4</sup> F. de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*. English ed. *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959).
- <sup>5</sup> See, for example, Robert Champigny, *Ontology of the Narrative* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972).
- <sup>6</sup> L. Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, trans. F. J. Whitfield (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1961).

- <sup>7</sup> R. Barthes, *Eléments de Sémiologie*. English ed. *Elements of Semiology*, trans. A. Lavers & C. Smith (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), pp. 89 — 94.
- <sup>8</sup> Hjelmslev, *op. cit.*, p. 121.
- <sup>9</sup> This claim is also made, with somewhat different characteristics, by Michel Arrivé, in *Les Langages de Jarry* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1972), p. 19.
- <sup>10</sup> New York: Bantam Books, 1964 (1st. ed., 1963), p. 5.
- <sup>11</sup> *Trágame Tierra*, by the Nicaraguan Lizandro Chávez Alfaro, p. 111.
- <sup>12</sup> From the novel *La Babosa*, by the Paraguayan Gabriel Casaccia, pp. 252 — 3.
- <sup>13</sup> See, for example, Bertil Malmberg, *Phonétique Française* (Malmö, Sweden: Mermods, 1969), pp. 43 — 4.
- <sup>14</sup> From the novel *Tres Tristes Tigres* (*Three Trapped Tigers*) by the Cuban Guillerno Cabrera Infante, p. 99.
- <sup>15</sup> For further remarks on Queneau's style, see David Michelson, 'Zazie dans le Métro: Raymond Queneau, linguiste des parigots et la belle langue française', Ph. D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1969; Régis Boyer, 'Mots et jeux de mots chez Prévert, Queneau, Boris Vican, Ionesco', *Studia Neophilologica* 40 (1968), 317 — 58; A. Filippovskaia, 'Limba franceză populară în proza lui Raymond Queneau', *Analele Științifice ale Universității Iasi; serie C; limba și literatură* 14 (1968), 61 — 72.
- <sup>16</sup> Cf. Arrivé, *op. cit.*
- <sup>17</sup> Cf. also J. Lipski, 'Pronominal code-switching in *Ubu Roi*', forthcoming in *Romance Notes*.
- <sup>18</sup> Arrivé, *op. cit.*, p. 101, has isolated a similar structure in certain works of Jarry, but with greatly different defining characteristics.
- <sup>19</sup> For a definition of *isotopy*, cf. Greimas, *op. cit.*, p. 188: 'A redundant group of semantic categories which makes possible the uniform reading of the text . . .'. See also François Rastier, 'Sistématique des isotopies', in A. J. Greimas, ed., *Essais de Sémiotique Poétique* (Paris: Larousse, 1972, pp. 80 — 106), esp. p. 82: isotopy is 'any repetition of a linguistic unit'.