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Managing Editor
Madhuri Bite

Editor-In-Chief
Dr. Vishwanath Bite

www.galaxyimrj.com

galaxyimrj@gmail.com

The Language of Literature

Dr. Dipali Sharma Bhandari

NSCBM Govt. PG College

Hamirpur (HP) Pin: 177001

Literature is a myth making activity. It is an expression of the unique human ability to lie, to make counterfactual statements, to mime, to create imaginative yet imaginary worlds. From this ability stems an important convention of interpretation of literary discourses. Much of everyday speech is meant to be taken literally. A literary connoisseur does not take literary language literally but only pretends to do so to receive communication. The literary artist may go against the canons of logical or scientific thought and still pretend that there is no loss of meaning. Events in literary discourse are not subject to the same modes of proof as they will be outside literature. Whether a man can be transformed into an insect (*The Metamorphosis*) or whether a man can be arrested and executed without any charge (*The Trial*, Kafka) or whether there is any biological possibility of pint-sized people (*Gulliver's Travels*) is largely irrelevant to the novel *qua* novel. The question is, what does the novelist make of them. Normal everyday discourse does not tolerate exaggeration or deviations from logical reality.

Whatever is exploited in literature is potentially a part of the native speaker's linguistic repertoire. What gives literary discourse its peculiar characteristics identified here – its form-content inseparability, its non-radical affronting of the selectional restrictions – is the higher level of concentration and the higher level of intensity at which exploration is done. Literary discourse exemplifies the most creative and significant use that language can be put to. This, however, may not be true of every literary utterance. In simple words, the distinguishing characteristics of literary discourse are not exhibited in all sentences found in the literary work of art: all lines of *Metamorphosis* are not symbolic and it is equally impossible to claim iconicity for all sentences in a novel. Referential use of language in literature and emotive use of language in non-literary discourse is common. This non-pervasiveness and the fact that elusive class by itself can be counted even on the fingers of a mutilated hand makes for skepticism about the discreetness of literary language. Literary discourse is best seen as a point on a continuum, the other varieties of discourses being the language of advertisements, slogans, riddles, mathematics and so on. All good speech has literary energy in it and a literary piece takes off from these into a world of its own.

The Language of Literature

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qua novel. The question is, what does the novelist make of them. Normal everyday discourse does not tolerate exaggeration or deviations from logical reality.

Literary language is deliberately planned and consciously focused. A creative work of art entails much critical labour in fixing “words in their best order” (Alker and Davis 171). This is truer for some writers than the others. Unlike in ordinary speech, in literature (in general) and poetry (in particular) the automatic, utilitarian methods of linguistic combination are consciously controlled, selected and formed into artistic wholes by the writer. Literature is spontaneous only in the sense of the author’s fidelity to his ideas and experiences. The translation of these ideas and experiences into a tangible linguistic medium stems from conscious deliberation. Much of everyday speech is unconscious and spontaneous. One may claim that many a good speaker is deliberate in his usage of words when he sticks rigidly to the principle of letting his meaning choose the word. Such a speaker comes closest to being a poet as far as the language part is concerned. All good speech is potentially poetical. Emerson hits the nail on the head when he calls language ‘fossil poetry’ (the poet). A good speaker or a poet defossilizes and revitalizes it.

A corollary of the above is another difference viz., the precision or conciseness of literary language. This preciseness or conciseness springs from the poet’s perpetual struggle to find the right word, sentence, idiom or symbol for his complex thought and to facilitate recreating his feelings, mood and the same effect in the reader’s mind. This is as essential for literary expression as it is for scientific expression. A poet with a fine sensibility fails to come off if he does not have control on the language, if he does not know how to manipulate the linguistic resources at his disposal to his advantage. As Emerson says, “the man (the poet) is only half himself, the other half is his expression” (Emerson 66). This precision is truer for poetry than for other literary forms. Prose fiction is rarefied and diffused in structure, quite unlike poetry. Some linguistic units of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* may be removed without affecting the essential structure of the works. However, there is nothing redundant or dispensable in Yeats’ ‘The Second Coming’. Everyday speech tends to be imprecise for various reasons. The scientific language exemplifies the referential use of language. It discards the cultural load and the accessory ideas that a word may carry. This is the reason why scientific language is easily translatable. Literary precision, on the other hand, does not exclude the connotative and associational richness of words, a world of concomitant meanings of lexical units which are not found in the dictionary. Further there are instances where the literary discourse is not precise but ambiguous or vague. These expressions keep literary discourse refreshingly open-ended. In arriving at the possible interpretations, the reader becomes introspective and goes back on his personal background, thoughts and experiences, which in fact is an intended objective of the artist.

Nowhere is the creative potential of language explored to an extent to which it is done in literature. Dislocation of language to the poet’s meaning with pleasant violence to the linguistic habits is a necessity due to the irritating gap between what the poet wants to say and what options the language provides at a given moment. In his attempt at bridging this gap, a creative artist stretches the traditional boundaries of expression further. He enriches the conventional means of expression. Language is not a static, ready-made entity but a flux; a resilient, creative energy. The grammar of poetry, to use a Jacobean epigram, is a product of the poetry of grammar. The poetic resource latent in the language explored by good speakers now and then are fully exploited and realized in literature in their full splendor. One need only open a collection of

poems, or a play or novel to see the selectional restrictions being violated with a gay abandon. 'A green thought in a green shade' (*Post* 224), E. E. Cummings *what if a much of a which of a wind* (Share and Wiman 114), 'the wilderness had patted him on his head' (Cobley 197), 'the burnt out ends of smoky days' (Gillies and Mahood 78) are illustrative of a multitudinous sea of examples. Ordinary speech also violates these restrictions to a certain extent, although not as radically as literary discourse does. Tasks of revitalization of archaisms, of using words in a refreshingly original way are tasks that only a literary artist can perform. However, an excessively idiosyncratic use of language defeats the very purpose of the socially motivated phenomenon that language essentially is. At least some of Cummings' poetry does not get home on this count. Poems which overcome the existing linguistic constraints to achieve a certain power and concentration of meaning, have greater value than those which do it merely as a linguistic exercise.

Besides, everyday speech is also creative in the Chomskyeian sense. Unlike animal communication, human language is free from identifiable external stimuli or internal physiological state. This makes for its unbounded scope. Controlling a finite set of rules and elements, a speaker produces and understands an infinite number of sentences. Almost no linguistic utterance is stereotyped or fossilized. Irrespective of the frequency of occurrence of an utterance in one's past linguistic experiences, every subsequent time one utters it, one does not reproduce it from a static, readymade list, but generates it anew. Literary discourse explores this basic property of human language further. The difference between everyday linguistic creativity and the creativity in literature is that the former is by and large unconscious and rule obeying whereas the latter is conscious and rule affronting. Yet, all creativity – whether in literature or elsewhere – is governed to some extent by rules, because rules are intentionally violated in the creation of literature. Language inexorably constrains you to say things which are essentially recognizable in terms of what precedes them. The poetic resources lie in the semantics of the language and not in its structural framework which by and large is immutable. The low-probability collocations such as 'the old star-eaten blanket of the sky' (Tearle 68) are semantic breakthroughs. The structural constraints can hardly be overcome without sacrificing grammatical well-formedness and intelligibility/perspicuity.

A simple example will suffice. 'Two husbands ago', coined on the analogy of 'two years ago' or 'two hours ago', deviates from the constraint that ago should be preceded by a phrase which carries some temporal signification. The language even allows 'two miles ago'. That every language has its built-in checks, its own centripetal forces is exemplified by two constraints – one semantic and one structural; at least on the creative potential of this particular construction. No poet can come up with a phrase like 'two suns ago' or 'two skies ago' because of the constraint that ago can only be preceded by a word or phrase which refers to something that can pass away with time. This semantic constraint makes the adverb a temporal adverb. The structural constraint is that the word preceding 'ago' should be a noun. When Dylan Thomas wrote 'A Grief Ago', he furthered the constraint – abstract or concrete, it has to be a noun. The language does not allow 'a green ago' or 'a worse ago'. The exploration stops here. One who ventures beyond only does so at the risk of sliding down in a scale of linguistic as well as poetic excellence.

Figurative or metaphorical language is not the sole prerogative of literature, as often believed. It is not even the prerogative of educated speech. Sometimes natural speech abounds in elegant

metaphors, similes, analogies, images and other non-literal use of language. An illiterate mother-in-law expressed her antagonism towards her daughter-in-law with the metaphor of a river where the waters are good but the crocodiles are a nuisance. Literature hardly makes use of better metaphorical language. All languages make non-literal use of their resources and derive symbolic meanings from physical meanings. Then there are idioms. You run a mile, but you can also run a laundry or a temperature or a risk. And you miss the bus not only when you actually miss the bus but also when you fail to get your girl's hand! Context-bound everyday speech also overcomes the selectional restrictions (the semantic and structural constraints) at times. Also, there is a metaphorical element in language *per se*. Often the literal meaning of words does not even penetrate our consciousness. Only literature puts the figurative use of language to more significant use.

To conclude, whatever is exploited in literature is potentially a part of the native speaker's linguistic repertoire. What gives literary discourse its peculiar characteristics identified here – its form-content inseparability, its non-radical affronting of the selectional restrictions – is the higher level of concentration and the higher level of intensity at which exploration is done. Literary discourse exemplifies the most creative and significant use that language can be put to. This, however, may not be true of every literary utterance. In simple words, the distinguishing characteristics of literary discourse are not exhibited in all sentences found in the literary work of art: all lines of *Metamorphosis* are not symbolic and it is equally impossible to claim iconicity for all sentences in a novel. Referential use of language in literature and emotive use of language in non-literary discourse is common. This non-pervasiveness and the fact that elusive class by itself can be counted even on the fingers of a mutilated hand makes for skepticism about the discreetness of literary language. Literary discourse is best seen as a point on a continuum, the other varieties of discourses being the language of advertisements, slogans, riddles, mathematics and so on. All good speech has literary energy in it and a literary piece takes off from these into a world of its own.

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