

The Figgerin' of Aunt Wilma: A Literary Analysis of the Narration

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Abstract

This paper presents a literary discourse analysis of a short story by an American humorist following Austin's Speech Act Theory as refined by John R. Searle and further elaborated by Brown and Levinson (1999). The text was found to be organized in the typical five-point (abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, and resolution) format expounded by Labov (1972) and Traugott and Pratt (1980). The role of characters in the text was also analyzed and discussed using Fillmore's (1968) Case Grammar as further developed by Grimshaw (1990), among others. The narrator's point of view in this text was found to surreptitiously elicit reader empathy with Mr. Hance (one character) through establishing a shared world and introducing new unshared experiences from this character's point of view. A switch of narrator alliance could be expected to result in matching changes in reader perceptions of characters in the story. Narratives such as this might be usefully utilized to improve student motivation and confidence in both creating and making sense of narratives and in learning English syntax and grammar within rich and meaningful contexts.

I. Introduction

The present paper is a literary discourse analysis of *The Figgerin' of Aunt Wilma*¹, a short story by James Thurber (1894-1961), one of the master American humorists. The story line is based on Aunt Wilma's mathematical confusion and her confrontation with Mr. Hance, the grocer, over an amount of five cents. *The Figgerin' of Aunt Wilma* is a narrative, an identifiable type of discourse of the literary genre², the characteristics of which include the use of public discourse "that may be read at a far distance in time and place from its origin" (Traugott & Pratt, 1980: 21). It also features figurative language and formal organization of its narrative which typically encompasses, following Labov (1972: 363) and Traugott & Pratt (1980: 250), the five components listed below.

1. *Abstract*. This includes the opening routines for stories; it briefly summarizes the whole story.
2. *Orientation*. This section identifies the participants/characters in the upcoming narrative and provides necessary background information.
3. *Complicating action*. This part has an attention-getting power because of its dramatic structure which is set in motion. The structure is called *plot*.
4. *Evaluation*. This is an important section of a narrative since it conveys the attitude of the narrator/speaker as far as the narrated events are concerned. In addition, it also indicates why the narrator/speaker believes the events are worth telling at all. Evaluation, unlike abstract, orientation, complicating action, resolution and coda which are usually sequential can occur at any and all points throughout a narration.
5. *Resolution*. A key component in the structure of narrative discourse, *resolution* closes the complicating action with its result.
6. *Coda*. In parallel with *abstract*, *coda* includes the closing routines for stories. Typically, it describes and

¹ *The Figgerin' of Aunt Wilma* by James Thurber was first published in *The New Yorker* (June 10, 1950).

² Narratives may be literary or non-literary. See, for example, Labov (2001, 2006).

evaluates the conclusive outcome of the events, and moves away from the time of the narrative back toward the narrator's present time.

II. Analysis of the Narrative Discourse

As with many other written texts of the same type, the title of *The Figgerin' of Aunt Wilma* serves as the *abstract* of the story since it provides readers with a brief summary of what they are going to encounter in the following narration: the calculations of a person referred to as *Aunt Wilma*. To some extent, it assures readers that the story will be worth their attention since, from our personal experience and knowledge of the world, we can predict that this act of 'figgerin' by 'Aunt Wilma' will probably lead to some entanglement. Thus, this is the beginning point of interest in the narrative. Before the narration properly begins, an *orientation* section consisting of several paragraphs provides necessary background to the story with descriptions of time, place, and the main characters:

(paragraph one)

When I was a boy, John Hance's grocery stood on the

TIME

South side of Town Street, just east of Fourth, in the
Central Market region of Columbus, Ohio. It was an old

PLACE

store even then, forty-five years ago...

TIME

(paragraph two)

Once, Mr. Hance gave me a stick of Yucatan gum, an

CHARACTER 1

astonishing act of generosity, since he had a sharp sense of the value of a penny. Thrift was John Hance's religion.

His store was run on a strictly cash basis.....

(paragraph three)

Mr. Hance was nearly seventy, a short man with white hair and a white mustache and the most alert eyes that I can remember, except perhaps Aunt Wilma Hudson's... Aunt Wilma was as honest as the day is long and as easily

CHARACTER 2

confused when it came to what she called figgerin,' as the night is dark...

The narrative can be said to begin *in medias res*³, since the first narrative clause occurs as part of the orientation at the end of paragraph three before *complicating actions* first appear in the following paragraph:

(paragraph three)

...By the time she had finished her long and tedious purchases of fresh produce from the country, and we had turned east into Town Street and headed for Mr. Hance's store, the weight of the market basket was beginning to pain my arm. "Come along, child, come along," Aunt Wilma snapped, her eyes shining

(paragraph four)

I saw Mr. Hance make a small involuntary gesture with his right hand as he spied Aunt Wilma coming through the door...

When *complicating actions* begin, it can be seen that a problem arises because of a violation of *appropriateness conditions* between characters. Mr. Hance assumes that his indirect communication, "*Hmm. Looks like I haven't got any pennies... Have*

³ In literary review and criticism, *in medias res*, from Latin "in the midst of things," typically describes a narrative that begins, not at the beginning of a story, but somewhere in the middle—usually at some crucial point in the action.

you got three cents, Mrs. Hudson?" (p.13), will be understood by Aunt Wilma by virtue of the *Co-operative Principle* which is based on a shared assumption that when people speak and listen to each other, they normally have the intention of accomplishing purposeful and effective communication in the context (Grice, 1975). However, Aunt Wilma fails to correctly interpret his intention despite the best efforts of Mr. Hance to be a co-operative speaker, explaining the situation so that his purpose is recognizable to the hearer: "*I know that, Mrs. Hudson,*" he replied, "*but I'm out of pennies. Now, if you give me three cents, I'll give you a nickel.*" (p. 14).

It seems that Aunt Wilma herself also tries to be co-operative in this speech situation when she offers: "*Maybe if I give you a dime, and takes the eight cents... It is two cents that you're short, ain't it?*" (p. 14). Nevertheless, Aunt Wilma's repeated miscalculations get things more and more complicated, putting either herself or Mr. Hance at a position of disadvantage. As far as the "I' narrator"⁴ i.e. boy character or author, is concerned, his speech act of explaining⁵ does not accomplish its goal either. This is because, although the surrounding circumstances are appropriate for his explanation, the beliefs and attitudes of the addressee, Aunt Wilma, are not, and so his attempted explanation predictably fails, a circumstance which fits in with some of the language *use* observations made by Brown & Levinson (1999).

⁴ The speaking 'I' which is usually understood as the narrator or addresser, rather than the author of a literary work but which here is indeed both the voice of the author and the character of the boy who tells the story as the author *was* in reality the boy who narrates the story which is an autobiographical reminiscence from his childhood.

⁵ The Speech Act Theory was formed by John Langshaw Austin (1911-1960), and later refined by the American philosopher, John R Searle. The principal tenet of the Speech Act Theory is that the uttering of a sentence is part of an action within the framework of social situations and conventions. Austin classified speech acts into five types: (i) verdictives: giving a verdict, (ii) exercitives: exercising power, rights and influence, (iii) commissives: promising or otherwise undertaking, (iv) behabitives: showing attitudes and social behavior, and (v) expositives: fitting an utterance into the course of an argument or conversation. See Brown & Levinson (1999) for more details.

Narration of the verbal mathematics duel between the grocery owner and Aunt Wilma goes on for a few pages (pp. 12-17) before the story comes to a *resolution*. Mr. Hance unwillingly succumbed to Aunt Wilma's confusion when it comes to 'figgerin' for fear of losing a greater amount of money: *Mr. Hance sighed deeply, rang out the cash drawers by pushing "No sale" and handed her the dollar* (p. 17).

The story includes a closing routine known as a *coda*. This *coda* is typical of others in that it describes and evaluates the ultimate sequences of the events and it moves away from the time of the narrative back toward the narrator's present. However, it differs from other codas in its rather extended length and in its inclusion of further embedded narratives. The section consists of two full paragraphs. The first includes a narration of a conversational exchange between Aunt Wilma and the 'I' narrator who makes direct comments on her misunderstanding, as an observer of the complicating actions: *"Gee whiz, Aunt Wilma... You still owe him three cents, don't you see that?"* (p. 17). The second is that between Aunt Wilma and her husband who makes an indirect comment on those actions, as told by the 'I' narrator: *"If Hance ever gives you that two cents he owes you, Wilma... I tell what you have to do to square accounts. Someday you're going to have to give him a dime for three cents,"* (p. 21). These serve to round off the confrontation event between Aunt Wilma and Mr. Hance, allowing the readers to see what becomes of Aunt Wilma after this episode of miscalculation.

All through the story, *evaluation*, frequently takes a prominence almost equal to the story's basic narrative clauses. Indeed, all sections contain evaluative information, most of which is external to the narrative. In the *orientation* section, evaluative commentary is there to assess the personality of the characters so that characterization is lifelike and thus makes the complicating actions sensible to the readers:

Once Mr. Hance gave me a stick of Yucatan gum, an astonishing act of generosity, since he had a sharp sense of the value of a penny. (pp. 9-10)

Aunt Wilma was as honest as the day is long and as easily confused, when it came to what she called figgerin', as the night is dark. (p. 11)

Evaluative commentary also appears in this part to reaffirm the tellability of the story and makes readers feel that it is worth it to pursue their reading of the story:

Her clashes with Mr. Hance had become a family legend. (p.11)

I was fortunate enough to be present one day in 1905 when Mr.Hance's calculating and Aunt Wilma's figgerin' came together in memorable single combat. (p. 11)

Occasionally, evaluative commentary emerges as interruptions in the progress of the narrative:

I was astounded at first, for here was the penny-careful Mr. Hance knocking three cents off a bill, but then I realized he was afraid of losing the dollar and was willing to settle for the lesser of two evils. (p. 16)

He was sure that if she scabbled in her purse again for the three pennies, she would want her dollar back, and they would be right where they had started. (p. 17)

Evaluative devices also appear in the form of comparators. Overt and covert comparatives, i.e., similes and metaphors, are also often used by the author to make comments on and evaluations of the actions that are going on in the story. These comparatives are so vivid and timely that they contribute a great deal to the sense of humor triggered by the plot of the short story. They are rather outstanding so that in a way, they may be considered a kind of lexical foregrounding as a recurrent evaluative device (See Traugott & Pratt, 1980: 114, for further details and discussion):

e.g. Aunt Wilma watched his expert movements closely, like a hostile fan waiting for an error in the infield.
(p. 13)

Aunt Wilma took her purse out of her bag and drew out a dollar bill slowly and handed it over, as if it were a hundred dollars she would never see again.
(p. 13)

She frowned over the four coins as if it were a difficult hand in bridge whist. (p. 14)

... and her eyes glazed for a moment like a groggy prizefighter's. (p. 15)

According to Labov (1972), sentence-internal evaluative devices such as gestures and expressive phonology, *i.e.*, *segment duration and voice quality used for expressive purposes (e.g. How sa-ad!)* are some of the intensifiers superimposed on the basic narrative syntax in "oral narratives of personal experience." However, in a written narrative text such as the present story, they do not seem to exist. Instead, comparable intensifiers are used in italics which let the readers know that some emphasis is placed on them by the speakers:

*"Well, I guess it's all right... but everything **is** so dear."* (p. 13)

*"**You** owe **me** **two** cents," she said sharply.* (p. 14)

*"That way, **I** would be making **you** a present of **five** cents, **Mrs. Hudson,**"* (p. 15)

*"**What** two cents, Aunt Wilma?" I almost squealed.* (p. 19)

*"I gave **him** the nickel ... I put it on the counter right there under your very eyes ..."* (p. 19)

III. Discussion

Like hearers of oral narratives, readers of a written text have to work to understand it correctly by interpreting what the narrator refers to and what his intentions are as far as the readers are concerned. The opening of *The Figgerin' of Aunt Wilma*, as stated before, serves to establish a shared universe between the narrator and readers by developing a perspective of time, place, and participants. The time was indicated as being in the author/narrator's past both in specific and non-specific terms: *when I was a boy* (p. 9), *forty-five years ago* (p. 9), and *one day in 1905* (p. 11). The place was specified as John Hance's grocery store to which readers are introduced as intimates of the author who moves from a specific point to a wider, more recognizable one: *on the south side of Town Street, just east of Fourth, in the Central Market region of Columbus, Ohio*. Readers are quickly given the impression they share the author's familiarity with this place via several clever devices. One of these is how the author switches from indefinite to definite articles:

It was an old store then ... The place smelled of coffee, peppermint, vinegar, and spices. Just inside the door on the left ... a counter with a rounded glass front held all the old-fashioned penny candies ... on the rear wall ...
(p. 9).

The store is then portrayed with prepositional phrases indicating location placed at the beginning of sentences so that importance is given mainly to the spatial relations of the things described as seen through the eyes of the author and transferred to readers:

Just inside the door on the left, a counter with a rounded

LOCATION

glass front held all the old-fashioned penny candies--gumdrops, licorice whips, horehound, and the rest--some of them a little pale with age. On the rear wall, between a

LOCATION

barrel of dill pickles and a keg of salt mackerel in brine,

LOCATION

*there was an iron coffee grinder, whose handle I was
sometimes allowed to turn. (p. 9)*

The participants (characters of the story) are brought into scenes again from the point of view of the narrator so that, in the descriptions of the two main characters, they are most of the time assigned the role⁶ of PATIENT:

Mr. Hance was nearly seventy, a short man with

PATIENT

*white hair and a white mustache and the most alert eyes
that I can remember, except perhaps Aunt Wilma Hudson's.*

Aunt Wilma lived on South Sixth Street and always shopped

PATIENT

*at Mr. Hance's store. Mr. Hance's eyes were blue and capable
of a keen concentration that could make you squirm. Aunt Wilma*

PATIENT

*had black agate eyes that moved restlessly and scrutinized
everybody with bright suspicion... He was a swift and*

PATIENT

*competent calculator, and nearly fifty years of constant
practice had enabled him to add up a column of figures almost
at a glance ... Aunt Wilma, on the other hand, was slow and*

PATIENT

painstaking when it came to figgerin'.

(p. 11)

⁶ In Fillmore's (1968) Case Grammar, it was argued that argument positions may have different realizations in syntax, e.g., *Agent* is the typically animate perceived as instigator of an action; *Patient* is the animate being affected by the state or action; *Location* is the spatial orientation of the action etc. The realizations are referred to as thematic or semantic roles. See Fillmore (1968), Grimshaw (1990), among others, for further discussion.

However, in the complicating action section, the role structures reflect the narrator's view of these two characters as active participants who are responsible for the actions carried out of their own volition. In their combating interaction, they exchange the roles of AGENT and PATIENT as one's action affects the other. Apparently, it is Mr. Hance who is assigned the role of PATIENT to Aunt Wilma's actions rather than the other way round. Mr. Hance is seen by the narrator as a bearer of Aunt Wilma's actions:

"Now, here," said Mr. Hance, turning and

AGENT

taking her dollar out of the still open cash drawer.

He laid it beside the nickel and the pennies. "Now, here,"

AGENT

he said again. "You gave me a dollar three, but you don't

AGENT

owe me a dollar three—you owe me five cents less than that. Here is the five cents." He snatched it up and handed

AGENT

it to her. She held the nickel between thumb and forefinger...

GOAL AGENT

Suddenly she handed him his nickel and picked up her

AGENT PATIENT

dollar and her three cents. She put the pennies back into

AGENT

her purse. "I've rung up the ninety-eight cents, Mrs. Hudson," said Mr. Hance quickly. (p. 16)

AGENT

Interestingly, the narrator uses a lot of *comparators*: *similes*, *metaphors*, and *negatives* in making evaluative comments as far as Aunt Wilma is concerned:

...her eyes gleamed briefly, as if she at last comprehended the peculiar deal (p. 16)

...her Sunday suspicion gleamed in her eyes (p. 14)

...she obviously didn't want to take the nickel or give up the dollar (p. 16)

...she couldn't understand the new and preposterous sum of seven cents that had suddenly leaped at her from nowhere (p. 15).

On the contrary, the author/narrator always uses sentences that signify straightforward meanings regarding Mr. Hance's actions:

Mr. Hance waited patiently, the flat of his hand on the counter (p. 13)

Mr. Hance began to show signs of agitation (p. 15)

...he put the dollar in the till and shoved the drawer shut with a decisive bang (p. 17).

It would seem that these different styles of language used by the author also reflect his point of view as regards each character. With his adroitness in mathematics, Mr. Hance is forthright in his manner and speech where figures and numbers are concerned while Aunt Wilma seems to be hesitating and secretive about what she has in mind because of her fuzzy thinking when it comes to calculation. As a result, her manners and actions are indirectly conveyed under the cover of similes and metaphors since they cannot, most of the time, be expressed otherwise.

IV. Conclusion

While point of view in fictions is discussed in terms of the narrator's authority, from omniscience to incompetence, degree of narrator's presence, from domination to self-effacement, and the way in which the readers' participation is invited (Traugott & Pratt, 1980: 287), it seems apparent that the narrator's point of view significantly influences readers' perception of the narration. In *The Figgerin' of Aunt Wilma*, by establishing a shared world and introducing new and unshared experience to readers through his eyes, the author/narrator's inclination to be on Mr. Hance's side is transferred subtly to the readers without their conscious realization of this fact. It would be interesting to see what reaction readers might have to the story told from the point of view of a narrator who is in favor of Aunt Wilma instead of John Hance, the grocery owner.

V. The Place of Narratives in ESL/EFL Classrooms

Narratives such as *The Figgerin' of Aunt Wilma* can improve the motivation of university students as they develop their reading and writing skills and can lead students to consider the process by which human beings perceive patterns in their lives. Students can be led to appreciate and benefit from a broader and richer language environment once they understand that a sense of narrative and its functions can be gleaned not only from celebrated writers with superlative writing skills, but also from the interactions of ordinary people. Students who realize that narrative is central to their own and other humans' thoughts, will probably also feel more confident in constructing narratives. Although no pedagogical technique can be dictated, those of us preparing or revising writing course materials might want to start with a definition of narrative, i.e., a method of recapitulating past experience, and the overall structure of narratives before they move on to basic narrative syntax—the simplest grammatical patterns with preterit verbs, and more complex elements which include locative and temporal adverbials, manner or instrumental adverbials, temporal conjunctions, comparators and complements of varying complexity, among others. Narratives certainly have a place in the teaching of English as a second and/or foreign language since they may aid students to acquire mastery of various registers of English or even Englishes as

well as confidence in understanding and creating narrative discourse.

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