LANGUAGE AND THE DOMINANCE OF MODALITY

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THE QUESTION WHETHER THE LANGUAGE of everyday life is primarily a referential system of notion or a highly modal, intersubjective activity of persuasion and fluid-meaning negotiation is an old one. Aristotle largely favors the former; Plato does clearly the latter. Where Aristotle's mimetic conception places the emphasis on language as a system for the imitation of action, Plato's distinction between logical and emotive language leads him to expel the poet from his ideal state as a liar. He quite rightly suspects that poets cannot be expected to observe modal abstinence but will, if they are worth their salt, make full use of their seductive charm. And even philosophical speech, such as Socrates', is ultimately not condemned by a large and democratic jury for the well-known proposition of impiety and the perversion of young minds, but rather for reasons of rhetoric: his arrogance, contempt, and insults. It is the main purpose of this paper to demonstrate the need for a comprehensive theory of covert modality.

Broadly speaking, both the history of language philosophy since Frege and more recent developments in linguistics exhibit a preference for strict referentiality and propositional meaning as sense. Nor does the notion of "counterfactual states" or "the ways the dice did not fall" of possible-world semantics hold much promise for the study of those intricate modal shifts as occur in socially saturated speech and predominate in literary discourse (Kripke, 44,48). And even modal semantics has tended to restrict itself to such modalities as alethic (necessity, possibility, contingency), deontic (obligation, permissibility), epistemic (knowledge, certainty, ignorance), and doxastic markers (belief, opinion, conjecture) (Carnap 1958, 1943; Wittgenstein; propositions 4464 and 515-5156). Some philosophers, notably Quine and Russell, have gone as far as to query the necessity and possibility of modal logic altogether (Rescher, 85-96; cf. also Poser). The predilection for laboratory expressions such as "The present King of France is bald" or "The cat is on the mat" will for some time remain symbols
One might object at this point that it was precisely for these reasons that John L. Austin introduced to analytical and atomistic thinking about language the triadic expansion of the propositional "core" to illocutionary, locutionary, and perlocutionary acts (Austin). But without in any way underestimating the revolutionary impact of Austin's approach, Austin never claimed, as I think he should have, that modality, or illocution and perlocution in interaction, should be understood as essential parts of meaning. Sadly, in his theory illocutions remain a force outside propositions, a view that has been ossified in the lucidly mechanistic version of speech-act theory as presented by John R. Searle (Searle 1969, 1975, 1976a, 1976b). But one could take the very different stance of saying that meanings as they occur are always already modalized, especially in the writings of language philosophy. Another modal blind spot of speech-act theory is that it takes for granted, certainly in Austin's and Searle's work, such notions as the "speaker" and the "hearer," as if they were reliable constants in the economy of meanings. Such fictions are indispensable if we wish to throw light on specific conceptualizations of language, but it should not have come as a surprise that the recalcitrance of their presence in speech-act theory was soon to meet a parodic challenge (Derrida 1977).

With few exceptions, literary linguistics has shared with philosophy this reluctance to deal with modality in a broad sense, as illustrated by the structuralist study of narrative from Propp to Todorov that has added considerably to the propositional-referential bias (Propp 1975, 1971). Indeed, the dominance of theories-of-action sequence masquerading as grammars of narrative has for a long time been the expression of the absence of a comprehensive modal narrative theory (cf. Prince 1973; less so 1982). Recently, Jacques Derrida, in one sense a more radical Austin, has ruptured this kind of thinking with his revival of a Heideggerian approach to language and its transformation into deconstructive practice (Derrida 1973b).

In everyday discourse, much of the speaker's overall modality is derived intersubjectively (that is, by mutual interpretation and meaning negotiation), largely from the semiological, nonlinguistic communicative dynamics of posture, dress, or facial expression. By contrast, a great deal of the modal forces operating in the reading of written material are constructed as a response to the text within the context of a wide variety of conditions that precede and accompany the reading/utterance situation. It is to the reading of texts, therefore, and complex rather than "simple" ones, that we must ultimately look for fruitful questions concerning modality. But first a few comments on the difference between discursive and formal signification.

Everyday speech exchange is part of what Jurgen Habermas once called the discourse of "symbolic interaction" (Habermas 1971: 81-122, esp 92 ff.; cf. also 1979 and 1987). His fundamental distinction between symbolic interaction and the realm of "purposive-rational action" with its "context-free" technical language, though revised later into triadic models, is still useful to a discussion of the special problem of modality in that it allows us to point out what one
might call the referential fallacy in the study of cultural production. Habermas quite rightly sees that our performances of activities in each sphere differ profoundly. In operating in the sphere of symbolic interaction, we take for granted social reciprocity without ever being certain that this assumption will be fulfilled. In other words, linguistic and semiotic signification in symbolic interaction may look like technical signs but are not really such signs at all. The sphere of wholly purposive rational action, on the other hand, is characterized by predictability and cause-and-effect relationships, switch-on-switch-off mechanisms, and "toggle logic." Its discourse therefore is one in which the exchange of messages can be rightly based on the assumption of the identity of the sent and received message. But how is meaning identity possible? It is possible in signification, which is ruled by definitions proper (that is, formally empty sign systems). And the difference between social discourse and such artificial languages lies in the triple neutralization operative in formal relations: the neutralization of reference, the neutralization of deixis, and the neutralization of the sociohistorical frame. In so far as technical discourse is "cognitive," in Habermas's sense, it too is characterized by the neutralization of its context. Technical discourse is thus the process of reconstructed and repeatable meaning, while cultural discourse is the process of constructed and shifting meaning, or meaning approximation. The differential between the two is implied modality.

Without a general theory of implied modality capable of giving a systematic account of this difference, the discussion of culture, language, and in particular literary language remains threatened by the appropriating bids from the realm of technical, purposive-rational action. Much of language philosophy and linguistic structuralism, in using the concept of the signified as a Saussurean given, shares with technical discourse the assumption of the possibility of identical meaning reconstruction. But this assumption must prove fatal when applied to culturally saturated social speech and especially literary discourse for the very reason that they explore modality more fully than do other kinds of discourse. Indeed, it makes sense to regard the discursive formations of any literature, past and present, as the most advanced linguistic experiments in the language laboratory of living speech. The reversal of propositional meaning in the construction of ironic modality, for instance, is only one extreme possibility of modification on a spectrum of vast complexity, a complexity that merits closer scrutiny. Between the reversal of propositional meaning implied by ironic modality and its straight reading—a case that does not exist—must be entailed an infinite number of meaning variations on one and the same proposition. Such a hypothetical scale would allow the allocation of specific readings of propositions and texts. But it would also have to be vindicated by an argument about the basis on which those readings are chosen in favor of alternative readings, a basis that only a comprehensive theory of covert modality could supply. It is in this sense then that I am defining modality as the structurable field of the manners of speaking underlying all utterances, a field made up of events of filling the "vacant subject positions" of discourse (Foucault, passim).

Even when we are confronted face to face by speakers in everyday speech situations, their full subjectivity cannot be present to us. Rather, we construct
what we consider to be fitting "subject positions" and respond accordingly, modifying them as the social dynamics of our needs, desires, and compulsions dictates. When we face a written text, the inferential nature of these modal constructions is foregrounded. Not only is the materiality of the prosodic contour absent, but also are all those other cues that are embedded in the multiple semiotic frame of actual speech situation and act as an interpretive schema. Alone with the text, we fill not only our own but also imaginatively a number of other subject positions. And to the degree to which we do so are we active makers of meanings or victims of only partly realized texts.

But so far the structurable field of manners of speaking has remained highly abstract. How do those events of concretizing subject positions constitute a network, and what is the inner horizonality of such events? In principle, one could say that if, as I assume, propositional and modal realizations are both unstable signifieds (rather than the one acting as signifier for the other as signified), then both signified domains are structurable according to the kind of sociopolitical mastergrid by means of which we may wish to conceptualize the social life-world. One such scenario could look like Table 1.

When we come to considering the literary text (as well as to reading the nonliterary text in a literary manner), our modal constructions need to be sensitive also particularly to intertextuality, or the way a text can be related to other texts. I am not suggesting, however, that the literary is a subset of workaday discourse. This is the broad assumption of the majority of linguistic approaches to literary language. I am taking the quite different view that literary language is not a subcategory of ordinary language, but its ludic alternative. Or, if one were to take a Heideggerian view, one could press the point further by suggesting that literary language is actual language, all others being reductive variants. Certainly the linguistic notion of langue as general linguistic rule-system is derived from one set of languages, namely everyday language; it is "merely" an abstraction from one set of language games and cannot therefore be transferred to apply automatically to quite another set, that of literary language, especially if we remember that one of the base rules of literature is that it continuously breaks and so rewrites all possible linguistic rules. This division is only an analytical one, for in pragmatics the ludic variants of everyday speech are part of social discourse, just as the latter's typical discursive formations reappear within the frames of the literary. And just as the aesthetic stance (or "aesthetic object" in Ingarden, "aesthetic function" in Mukařovský) (Ingarden 1973a, 1973b, esp. 175ff.; Mukařovský 1970) is not a substance of pragmatic functions, so too should the performance of literature not be seen as merely a subordinate category of everyday life. Rather, the pragmatic and the aesthetic are discourses within the larger system of general semiosis: literature is the ludic alternative to the discourse of everyday life. This is why literary language can look both indistinguishable and totally different from workaday speech.

Whenever we read a narrative text in an aesthetic manner (the literary text being the kind of text that encourages such a manner of reading by special markers), we not only tend to place emphasis on the oscillation between what is said and how it is said, between the so-called content of the proposition and
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its modalities, or the way and by whom it is expressed, but also put greater weight on the modal side of the equation. In this asymmetrical dialectic, every item of the reader's construction can function as a modal qualifier of any other item.

It is on the grounds of this fundamental asymmetry that literary theory must take itself seriously enough to see its own field of inquiry as its legitimate starting point: the modally weighted reading of the literary text, that is, any kind of literary reading, without at this stage attaching any value to particular choices. The strength, for example, of Derrida's deconstructive approach is not so much philosophical—although his theory of meaning instability is substantial—as it is literary. For he reads the philosophical text as if it were literary, uncovering as he does its concealed metaphors, its unacknowledged rhetoric and hidden speech acts, in short, its covert modalities. In so undermining the natural attitude of reading, Derrida, notwithstanding his critique of the early Husserl, is a true phenomenologist, albeit a playfully noetical one.

To take the act of reading as its point of departure is a natural for the phenomenological method, since in phenomenology the grasping of an object is in reality a description of the acts of consciousness we perform when we realize a phenomenon. And contra the subjectivist charge often leveled against phenomenology, such acts are always performed intersubjectively—that is, against the background of communicative competence according to which any individual act is embedded in and informed by the social life-world of a semiotic community. No matter how experienced a reader I am, my total typified knowledge, everyday as well as intertextual, comes into play in the act of reading. And part of this competence is the ability to perform a wide range of overt and, more important, covert modal operations (cf. Habermas 1970a).

Any aspect of a literary text, its embeddedness in intertextuality and a vast number of other phenomena (as for example current ideological stances, writing and reading trends, production, or the dominant "syllabus") are potential clues as to a work's constructable manner of speaking. Consequently, the same range of items also acts as a set of potential signposts for our manner of reading. This manner of reading is the evocation of literary meanings by constructing a work's propositional content as always already and multiply modalized. As I have tried to show elsewhere, every narrative guides the reader to construct a dynamic and dialectically linked double vision of spatiotemporal aspects, aspects of acts and events, personae, and philosophical and ideological features on the side of the narrative speech act and the side of the quasi-referential "presented world" (Ruthrof 1981). In this process of the reader's construction of narrative, all linguistic features, concepts, mental images, or ideological aspects, as well as the total aesthetic object that accrues to shimmer unstably as a retrospective view at the end of any reading, act as modal forces. They are not only concretized as such or held in readiness for the reader's concretizations, but also modify one another and so introduce a degree of fluidity which forcefully contradicts propositional stability.

As a consequence of this emphasis on the reader's construction of speech attitudes underlying the propositions of a literary text as well as the whole text,
I am bound to juxtapose to the conception of a relatively stable propositional form of reading of artistic narrative the notion of a highly unstable modal alternative. But instead of venturing from the platform of overt modality to the less well-known regions of implied modality as modal logic has tended to proceed, I prefer the dive into the deep water of covert modality as a problematic that is involved in all reading. This leaves me with the unenviable and perhaps unmanageable task of indicating how at least part of this problematic could be understood as a function of literary reading.

**MODALITY AND NARRATIVE**

We can begin to describe modality by distinguishing between the modal force of the reader’s overall stance that he/she brings to bear on the act of reading, the overtly given and the inferrable modalities within the text, and the inferred authorial attitude as an abstraction from the text. Since every writer and reader is inextricably interwoven into the web of a social life-world, the construction of meaning must include the authorial stance as an object of conjecture and the reader’s own commitment as an object of self-reflexive analysis. Because a novel’s *manner of speaking* is primarily realized as a *manner of reading*, the reader’s participation in a specific historical “Aesthetic Ideology” (in literary competence, etc.) as part of a “General Ideology” as well as his realization of the “Literary Mode of Production” involved as part of a “General Mode of Production” have a bearing on his constructions (Eagleton, 44-63). Accordingly, any specific reading may be regarded as more or less relevant if measured against the dominant ideology of a given historical moment. Individual readings may of course transcend what appears to be the dominant code and so violate and restructure the canon of interpretations. But whatever the ruling horizon of reading expectations, it is at the level of the manner of reading as an active force in the construction of narrative meaning that non-literary theories must be harnessed for a more comprehensive grasp of the extraneous modal forces co-determining the text.

From this perspective, one function of the text can be seen to be a complex *concealment* of multiple modalities: the text as hermeneutic challenge. From the same angle, the function of reading and criticism is the positing of modalities, and the function of narrative theory is the systematic exploration of all aspects of that complexity. I am arguing therefore also that, for instance, Halliday’s concept of register as “the clustering of semantic features according to situation types” or discourse that is dependent on the type of situation cannot act as an umbrella subsuming all other features of the text. In everyday speech, and more complexly in literary narrative, register is a discourse chosen for a purpose. It is for this directionality, which selects discourse and therefore has logical as well as temporal priority over discourse, that I wish to reserve the term modality. In the following I select a few instances of such modal directionality.

The registers or discourse genres that Joyce employs in “The Oxen of the Sun” scene of *Ulysses* are not in themselves a direct indication of their apparent purpose: namely, parodies of English styles. Their parodic function is understood...
more broadly by the reader in relation with his/her construction of an overall implied authorial stance: an intertextual conception of the world in which art gives meaning to sociopolitical reality (Joyce, 380-425).

Looking along the forward reading dimension, modality can be manifest or latent. But overt modal markers usually pose no great problems to reading. It is when there are no modal markers present in a passage that the reader’s task becomes demanding and also the more interesting. Not only could we say that every word along the syntagmatic axis is potentially qualified by every other word, but also that absences, negations, and other paradigmatic alternatives fulfill modal functions (cf. Iser, 182-225).12

Another aspect of modality comes into view if we focus on reading as a stratified activity.13 The strata of print/sound, linguistic formations, aspects and objectivities, and inferred work ideology act as modal forces both in terms of their function as logical steps for further operations (we cannot derive work ideology before having performed linguistic operations) and in terms of the role they play in the overall "polyphony of aesthetic value qualities" (Ingarden 1973a) that the reader may attach to any feature of any stratum as well as to the interaction of the strata in the reading consciousness.14 But modality plays a role not only in the realization of single items along the syntagmatic extension and stratification of the text, but also in macrostructural operations.15

When we decide, for example, what kind of narrative nexus a story displays (additive, causal, symbolic correlation, metafictional self-reflexivity, or narrative disruption), we are making at the same time a modal inference about the author as an engineer of stories. The exclusion of the ethical dimension in Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” in favor of foregrounding the mechanics of action and causality may lead us to characterize the story as teleological narration revealing an epistemic and alethic modal interest on the part of the author. By comparison, Dostoevsky’s “The Landlady” (“Chozyayka”) with its possible multiple solutions defines its reading as speculation and the story as guessing game (Gerigk, 73ff.). Its underlying authorial stance could be described broadly as doxastic. Such modal inferences at the level of macrostructure and architectonic dynamics have a direct bearing on overall thematic inferences and work ideology.

We are now asking: What is the story saying?

From the perspective of the retrospective view, another aspect of modality has to be acknowledged. Our step-by-step reading is transformed, more or less radically, by our overall concretization which, in turn, is modified by our corrections, and so on.16 This process of continuous requalification is furthered by the fact that the reader, between different readings, does not merely change as a result of influences outside the text but, as does the viewer of Apollo’s torso in Rilke’s poem, is changed by what he/she has constructed from the text (Rilke, 115).17 And although Rilke has a more essentialist view of the subject than Foucault, he does suggest here the possibility of different subject positions vis-à-vis a text taken by one and the same individual reader.

Fundamental to the construction of narrative meaning is also the realization of the following triple modality of utterance. As we attend to the surface narrative, we conceptualize the activities of three interrelated but distinct modal forces:
the modality of the presented personae, that of the narrator(s) or narrative voice(s),
and that of the inferred author. Our construction of the first two allows us to
conjure up the latter, while at the same time that last construction, once achieved,
may radically modify our assumptions about the previous modalities. Further,
each presented speech act, as distinguished from presentational speech acts, has
its own modality, revealing aspects of the quasi-physical as well as moral-political
stance of the speaker. Presented speech acts also function as a modal force
qualifying other presented speech acts as well as those of the narrator. In the
case of realized, unreliable narration, the reader’s judgments clash with those
of the narrator, with the result that the latter tend to be read as inauthentic. From
the resulting tension between the given signifiers and our substitutions emerges
a set of inferences about the overall authorial stance, which in turn acts as a
modal cue for our reading of the text as a whole.

A case in point is the reader’s construction of the complex presentational
process in “The Wandering Rocks” episode in Ulysses, which acts itself as a
signifier for a more abstract signified: a set of authorial modal characteristics.
The spatially dynamic and temporally static first part of the episode is linked
with the spatiotemporal linearity of the second part by the matching images of
the cross-section through blood vessels as against the organic flow of blood
through a vein (Joyce, 281-354). If we take all this (techniques and images) as
a quasi-referential statement, we are inclined to construct a corresponding autho­
rial manner of speaking: an interest in the technical as well as symbolic exploration
of narrative art as well as a view about active analytical and passive polythetic
typical acts of consciousness. Such modal inferences in turn result in a reviewing
of the nature and possible function of presentational-technique-as-statement.

The construction of the inferred author is postponed when a number of
speakers compete with one another for narrative authority. In the case of Chaucer’s
Canterbury Tales, this competition adds significantly to the work’s deictic com­
plexity, its speech acts ranging from pornography to anti-Semitism to sanctimoni­
ous piety.18 And since all critical attempts have failed to show any special
possible affinity between any one narrator or group of narrators, we are left to
assume that Chaucer’s ultimate stance is aesthetic-moral rather than moral-aesthetic,
and that he prefers to show his medieval world as colourful theatre rather
than as an admirable or a despicable world. Here modality and theatricality are
structurally linked. In the performed dramatic text, this nexus often results in
the modal evasiveness of the authorial statement.

One of the directly authorial propositions in any narrative is its title, although
the authorial modal inferences it may suggest vary considerably and stand in a
reciprocally qualifying relationship with all other aspects of our construction.
There is little we can derive from the title Emma, except that it is realized as
the subject of a long and compound predication about Emma, a little more from
Pride and Prejudice, and a good deal more from intertextual titles such as
Ulysses, Dr. Faustus, The Sound and the Fury, and Eyeless in Gaza. Huxley’s
title, for instance, refers to the beginning of Samson Agonistes in which the lines

Promise was that I
Should Israel from Philistine yoke deliver:
Ask for this great deliverer now, and find him
Eyeless in Gaza at the mill with slaves,
Himself in bonds under Philistian yoke

act as a structural question and promise answered and fulfilled by Samson's self-sacrifice at the end of Milton's dramatic poem (Milton, 250, lines 38-42). In turn, Huxley's elliptical quotation constitutes a tentative modal interpretative guide to our construction of Anthony's and Helen's initial sense of spiritual emptiness as contrasted with their social and personal commitment at the end of the novel.

The above catalog of modal transformations is meant neither to be complete nor to act as a new form of narrative closure; it is designed as an indication of the need to structure a problematic field. For without an emphasis on covert or inferential modality, our theorizing about literary texts is incapable of escaping the limitations of the propositional-referential bias. Nor will deconstructive freestyle remain a satisfactory response in the long term. What is needed beyond Derrida's demonstration of rhetorical force is a combination of theoretical approaches that allow us to communicate about the reasons for the instability and relative opacity of literary discourse and indeed all "natural" language.

NOTES

1. Argued by Plato at various places, as for instance in the Republic, Books II, III, and X, Apology, Phaedrus, and Ion.
2. According to the Apology, the jury consisted of 501 members.
3. Although Todorov is aware of part of the modal side of narrative in The Poetics of Prose (e.g. 25ff.), he still reveals a strong "propositional" bias.
4. In reading Derrida's "Difference" one should not forget the author's considerable debt to Heidegger's paper "Language" and his discussion of "ontic-ontological difference" in Being and Time.
5. I am not aware of the existence of such a theory.
6. However, I wish to retain the distinction between langue and parole in the senses of stipulatable rule structure and actual speech, respectively, whereby langue always has logical, though no temporal, priority over parole.
7. The fact that literary language can look like everyday language (without functioning as such) and unlike everyday speech declares the search for essential properties of literary language a misguided enterprise.
8. "Intersubjectivity" is understood here in the sense in which Alfred Schutz continued Husserl's research on the subject. The extension of this notion along lines of social philosophy and communication owes much to Habermas's concept of "communicative competence" (1970) which is not identical with Dell H. Hymes's socio-linguistic usage of the term.
9. Habermas's study of "distorted communication" explores, among other things, modality as manipulation.
10. This follows from a model according to which the actual author and the actual reader communicate with one another "through their implied counterparts" (Chatman, 31). My objection to Chatman's study is that its exploration of the modal side of narrative still reflects the structural bias toward the propositional and so remains restrictive. There is strictly no logical reason why the
modal side of narrative (discourse), especially in its covert forms, should receive less space than its celebrated propositional counterpart (story).

11. As a "selection of meanings that constitutes the variety to which a text belongs," register still requires a further point of orientation in the life world from which the chosen register makes sense (Halliday, 111).

12. Iser's discussion of "blanks," "negations," and "negativity" in Iser 1979: 182-225 is a development of Ingarden's notion of "concretization," which in turn is a special case of the Husserlian "appresentation."

13. For a detailed discussion of stratification from the perspective of the reader's construction of narrative meaning see Ruthrof 1981: 51ff.

14. I am disregarding the objectivist notion of such a polyphony being a property of the text itself.

15. Note that the pair syntagmatic axis/stratification is not coterminous with syntagmatic/paradigmatic.

16. I have applied the noesis/noema distinction to the cumulative construction of meaning along the forward reading dimension in both lyrical poetry and narrative; cf. e.g. Ruthrof 1974, 1975.

17. A fruitful interpretive link is established between Rilke's poem and Malcolm Lowry's Under the Volcano by William H. Gass, 76.

18. Cf., e.g., "The Reves Tale" and "The Prioresses Tale."

WORKS CITED


