Language in and through literature
An applied SFL perspective

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1. Introduction

I want to start this tribute to Professor Donna R. Miller's work by referring to the foundations of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), namely Halliday's *Language as Social Semiotic*, where we read "One can hardly take literature seriously without taking language seriously; but language here is being looked at from a special point of view", and "literature is made of language" and cannot be "treated as if it was something insulated from and even opposed to language" (1978, pp. 11-12). This statement, significantly occurring at the beginning of his theory of language, introduces the argument that separating literature from language contradicts a holistic view of language comprising several other human endeavours, while an educational linguistics needs to include literary language or the "more 'cultural' applications – the most important of which is in the appreciation of literature" (Halliday 2007, p. 28). However, it also says that the use of language in literature is "special".

Literature as a "special register" is the lesson taken up by Hasan in *Linguistics, Language and Verbal Art*, where she argues that what is special about the literary text is its symbolic value and the deeper meanings encoded which distinguish it from non-literary forms of communication. In her extensive analysis of literature, or "verbal art", a wording she borrows from Russian semioticians and Prague school linguists, notably Mukařovský and Jakobson (e.g., Jakobson 1985), she shows how all language choices made in a literature text aim at a general hypothesis or "theme", defined as "the deepest level of meaning [...] what the text is about when dissociated from the particularities of that text" (Hasan 1989, p. 97). In a social semiotic understanding of how language functions, literature is one variety of language, it is language as art, it cannot, therefore, be artificially separated from language and kept outside the concerns of linguistic studies. The distinction has been overemphasised in university degree programmes in Modern Languages and Literatures for the sake of simplifying a specialisation that

should be apparent to the student who will choose whether to specialise in linguistic or literary studies, but the educational linguist Halliday and Hasan are thinking of should not cultivate it if they want their pupils "to be able to talk in accurate and revealing terms about the language of prose and verse texts" (Halliday 2007, p. 32).

I believe this is what Professor Miller had in mind when she established the English Language Studies Programme at the then Faculty of Modern Languages and Literatures of the University of Bologna in the early 2000s and started offering a course that was both firmly rooted in SFL and Hasan's notion of verbal art and drawing from the British tradition of stylistics. Her aim was to develop knowledge "of" and "about" the language in learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) while promoting the aesthetic appreciation of literature.

In the Spring term of 2004, after I had been teaching English grammar from an SFL perspective to undergraduate students for three years, using literary as well as non-literary text samples to illustrate the theory, I joined Donna's course for Master's students of Language, Society and Communication in the audience. The reading list consisted of Hasan's 1989 book, Michael Toolan's *Language in Literature. An Introduction to Stylistics* (1996) and some SFL-oriented studies dealing with a specific author, e.g., Nørgaard's 2003 study of James Joyce. The objective was to develop mastery of the analytical tools therein proposed to read and analyse poems. The journey I took together with the students, from the poems analysis of speech and thought representation, modality and attitude, cohesion, processes and participants to Hasan's two levels of semiosis and universal theme in literature texts was a fascinating one that prompted some interdisciplinary collaboration with colleagues from the literature division, among which a couple of Master's theses supervisions, whose aim was the analysis of language "in" literature (I recall one in particular on dualism, ethics and aesthetics in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*). It also encouraged me to incorporate literature text samples into the pedagogical grammar I published in 2006, a simplified version of SFL for the EFL learner (Freddi 2006).

Much of Donna's research has been devoted to the study of the linguistic features of literature both as evidence for "systematic combination of choices which might point to universal themes and higher symbolic values" (Miller 2017a, p. 514) and as contributing positively towards the aesthetic appreciation of literature (cf. Miller 2019, 2021, Miller, Monti 2014, Miller, Luporini 2018b). With this paper I dwell in this tradition of language-in-literature studies and SFL educational applications championed by Professor

Miller and show how the literature text can be used to teach language in a way that is context-based, helps learners develop language awareness and promotes the cultural appreciation of literature. My perspective, therefore, is one of language "in" and "through" literature and is thought of as especially suitable for students of Modern Languages and Literatures. It is understood as meeting the educational needs of students majoring in English language or English literature and more broadly responding to the educational calls of applied SFL.

In the next sections the theoretical underpinnings derived from Miller (2021) are briefly reiterated and some examples are given to illustrate the method adopted. Although the illustration is limited to a few examples, the approach could be extended to other literature texts and language features, e.g., one could use song lyrics to illustrate thematic structure, British and American novels to illustrate dialect variation, children literature to exemplify lexical cohesion, and so on and so forth.

2. Description and narration

In the chapter on "educational stylistics" of her 2021 book *Verbal Art and Systemic Functional Linguistics*, Miller discusses her experience of teaching the language "in" literature during a series of workshops delivered to third year undergraduates of Modern Languages and Literatures at the University of Bologna. Two major claims are substantiated by the data analysis in the chapter: first, she shows how the linguistic study of literary texts can bring about a broader reflective process on language meaning-making potential in the students when actively engaged in the stylistic analysis of selected poems. Second, she makes the stratification of language and the moving across strata, which is inherent in a systemic functional theorisation of language, key to her pedagogical approach to verbal art, as summarised by the following quote: "The text is always [...] viewed as a [...] window onto the semiotic system of language itself, of which it is a concrete instantiation, [...]. Workshop analysis is from below, moving from text to semantics and context along the cline of stratification" (Miller 2021, p. 71). It is this movement across strata of language, from lexicogrammar to situation to culture, that I try to illustrate here, using the literature text as the ideal locus of language development.

The examples in this section serve the multiple purpose of exemplifying discourse functions and writing styles, such as the descriptive and narra-

tive functions, and the linguistic features that are most often associated with them, by moving recursively between grammatical, semantic and situational analysis. To distinguish between description and narration as two "patterns" of literature, one can take verb tenses together with the types of lexical verbs, the prepositional phrases that occur in combination with the lexical verbs and move onto the next stratum of semantic configurations into processes, participants and circumstances to learn something about the language most typical of descriptive and narrative writings, while at the same time introducing students to a captivating read.

2.1. *Description*

The passage in (1) from *To Kill a Mocking Bird* offers a compelling example of descriptive writing. The very concept of descriptive writing and what is meant by descriptions (herein contrasted with narrative writing and narration) can be presented to students with a bottom-up analysis, choosing simple grammatical categories, i.e., word classes, and their combinations, as the entry point into the style of the novel.

The excerpt features a series of verbs, mainly but not exclusively "be", followed by a modified noun phrase that contains descriptive adjectives, or epithets, functioning as attributes ("was an old town", "was a tired old town", "was hotter then", but also "turned to red slop", "were like teacakes with frostings of sweat and sweet talcum"). One can notice that similar sequences are typical of relational attributive (and circumstantial) processes, whose meaning is to establish a link between a person or thing, i.e., the carrier participant that is being described ("Maycomb", "the streets", "grass", "the courthouse", "men's collars", "ladies"...) and its characteristics, the nominal strings in the attributes (e.g., "a tired old town"). Even "grew" and "sagged", with their metaphorical meaning, function as a relational process type. All exemplify the language usually associated with descriptions, namely stative verbs of the relational attributive and circumstantial process type and contribute to a grammatical and semantic pattern where the adjectival, descriptive tendency is prevalent.

The analysis of descriptions in fiction can continue by zooming in on the role of prepositional phrases (PPs) with a locative function, circumstances of place-location, also often appearing in descriptive texts together with relational processes. Examples of this are "on the sidewalks", "in the square", "in the sweltering shade of the live oaks on the square". PPs of place-location are often found in descriptive texts, descriptions having to do with

location of things and people in space. With their presence and the associated lexical choices, they reinforce the same semiotic pattern, construing the backdrop to the fictional situation portrayed by the novel, a landscape of heat, lethargy, and idleness. The same excerpt lends itself to an even more granular analysis of the lexicogrammar, for example if we take the PP "with frostings of sweat and sweet talcum" that functions as embedded qualifier. The embedded structure can be shown to display further descriptive language with vivid imagery of the women's frocks, likened to rather revolting teacakes whose decorations are a mixture of sweat and talcum powder.

The analysis can therefore move back and forth across strata of language highlighting different degrees of delicacy in terms of grammar and vocabulary (Halliday, Matthiessen 2014, Bartlett 2021a). Seen from above, the passage serves the purpose of illustrating the process of "instantiation" whereby the text is created through systemic selections made locally (Halliday, Matthiessen 2014, p. 594). In the case under analysis, the descriptive pattern is created by the relational attributive clause with its structural realisations. Seen from below, the type of transitivity configuration and its semantics all contribute to an intense description of the place and sleepy atmosphere of the setting in the context of fictional writing.

1. Maycomb was an old town, but it was a tired old town when I first knew it. In rainy weather the streets turned to red slop; grass grew on the sidewalks, the courthouse sagged in the square. Somehow, it was hotter then: a black dog suffered on a summer's day; bony mules hitched to Hoover carts flicked flies in the sweltering shade of the live oaks on the square. Men's stiff collars wilted by nine in the morning. Ladies bathed before noon, after their three-o'clock naps, and by nightfall were like soft teacakes with frostings of sweat and sweet talcum.

A further analytical step could be taken reaching up intertextually to other descriptions in American literature that take place in the southern states of the U.S. One author comes to mind with his compelling descriptions of the southern United States, Cormac McCarthy in *The Road*, although here cold, rain, and snow rather than heat and mugginess are the prevailing lexical features of the descriptions ("The day was brief, hardly a day at all. By dark the rain had ceased [...]. The faintly lit hatchway lay in the dark of the yard like a grave yawning at judgment day in some old apocalyptic painting"). The incipit of *The Road* also has something of the descrip-

tive style of Harper Lee's writing, even though McCarthy's prose differs significantly. Thanks to the reiterated ellipses of the relational process verb ("Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world"), the author achieves a rugged musical effect that is certainly absent from *To Kill a Mocking Bird* and more typical of poetry than prose. However, by showing the connections between the two passages in terms of language and overall descriptive function, the language teacher can stimulate in the learners the identification of the "patterning of patterns" and the kind of reflection, or "reasoned analysis of a literary work" that Miller derives from Hasan's social-semiotic approach to verbal art (Hasan 2011, cited in Miller 2021, p. 61).

2.2. *Narration*

The incipit of *To Kill a Mocking Bird* can be used to exemplify another dominant discourse function in fiction, namely narration or narrative writing, as in excerpt (2). Narration has to do with locating and sequencing events in time, as is apparent in the fronting of the temporal clauses framing the actions temporally ("When he was", "When it healed", "When enough years had gone by"). The passage shows how the flow of events is organised temporally, "construed as a series of episodes" (as worded by Halliday, Matthiessen 2014, pp. 428-429). The preference in narratives is for dynamic verbs of the material process type (e.g., "got his arm broken" meaning "broke") and for the past tense. Narratives are agent-dominated texts, but they are also temporally structured.

> 2.   When he was nearly thirteen my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow. When it healed, and Jem's fears of never being able to play football were assuaged, he was seldom self-conscious about his injury. [...] When enough years had gone by to enable us to look back on them, we sometimes discussed the events leading to this accident.

Another excerpt, (3), illustrates clines of narration-description although the contrast between the two discourse functions seems less clear-cut here.

> 3.   We lived on the main residential street in town – Atticus, Jem and I, plus Calpurnia our cook. Jem and I found our father satisfactory: he played with us, read to us, and treated us with courteous detachment.

The semantic pattern construed by the verbs is that of past actions, processes of doing ("lived", "played", "read", "treated") combined with actors and goals ("we", "Atticus", "Jem and I", "Calpurnia our cook", "he", "us") and accompaniment and beneficiary roles ("with us", "to us"), the participants in the events recounted and the main characters of the story. The semiosis seems to fulfil the very purpose of storytelling, namely the narration of events set in time which occurred to the characters. However, time referencing is here limited to the past tense and not expressed via circumstantial elements of time-location which tend to typify narrative writing. These do not appear in (3) where instead PPs tend to encode participant-like roles (cf. Halliday, Matthiessen 2014, p. 348) such as accompaniment ("with us"), beneficiary/recipient ("to us"), and manner ("with courteous detachment"). Atticus is depicted as doing things together with, for his children and as polite and respectful of his household. The narrative sequence borders on the descriptive and becomes characterisation, i.e., the description of the (fictional) situational context and characters' psychological condition, which creates the setting to the disruptive events narrated later on in the novel. Through the description, the father figure's actions acquire the plasticity and visibility of narrated events that is typical of writing for the screen, where a lot can be conveyed by the actions shown and which dialogue can help make more explicit. This discussion takes me onto the next point of language semiosis and narrative orientation.

3. Narrative orientation, telling and showing

Example (4) is the incipit of *The Dwarves of Death*, an entertaining story by the contemporary British novelist Jonathan Coe. Here the analysis is focused on first and second person subject (and object) pronouns and personal deixis as part of exophoric reference, i.e., references to interactants outside the text (Halliday, Matthiessen 2014, p. 606). The same method is used as in the previous analyses, exemplifying the constant moving across strata, from lexicogrammar through semantics to context recursively.

4. I find it hard to describe what happened. It was late in the afternoon, on a far from typical London Saturday. Winter was mild that year, I remember, and although by 4.30 it was already good and dark, it wasn't cold. Besides, Chester had the heater on. It was broken, and you either had it on

full blast or not at all. The rush of hot air was making me sleepy. I don't know if you know that feeling, when you're in a car – and it doesn't have to be a particularly comfortable car or anything – but you're drowsy, and perhaps you're not looking forward to the moment of arrival, and you feel oddly settled and happy. You feel as though you could sit there in that passenger seat forever. It's a form of living for the present, I suppose. I wasn't very good at living for the present in those days: cars and trains were about the only places I could do it.

Several features can be noticed. First, the accompanying verbs are all of the mental and relational process type, having to do with sensing (e.g., the cognitive "remember", "know", "suppose") and being (e.g., "be" used to construe feelings and emotions). Second, there is roughly the same number of occurrences of first and second person pronouns with "you" outnumbering "I/me" and creating a dynamic between speech roles, speaker as narrator and addressee, that shifts the focus on the reader, thus engaging readers directly in the narration. This lexicogrammatical pattern serves to introduce the young protagonist and narrator of the story as someone who is somewhat at sea, overwhelmed by an overall sense of frustration (apparent from the lexical chain of the attributes "sleepy", "drowsy", "oddly settled and happy") and bound to be unsettled by some extraordinary events (indeed he will witness a murder).

The first person narrator and the involvement of the reader into the experiences narrated lends itself to the discussion of another system of grammar and semantic potential, namely speech and thought representation, or the ways of reporting speech and thought and the alternation between narrator's orientation and character's orientation (Toolan 1996, 2016). The excerpt can be used to introduce the difference between reported and direct (quoted) speech and thought and the grammatical system of projection as well as intermediate forms between quoting and reporting that are very common in literature, namely free direct speech/thought and free indirect speech/thought (the latter explained in Halliday, Matthiessen 2014, pp. 528-532). In excerpt (4) there appears this mixture of quoting and reporting and the free combinations of features of both when, for example, we look at the narrator's comments "I remember" and "I suppose", the latter being closer to a direct than a reported thought and realising a modal meaning of subjective explicit probability while retaining its projecting function (Halliday, Matthiessen 2014, p. 688). The same blend of features applies to "I don't know if you know that feeling, when you're…" where the pronoun

"you" directly addressing the reader in the projecting clause is mixed with the grammar of an indirect question.

In sum, the passage exemplifies a narrative orientation that gets the reader closer to the characters and switches from a reported recount to a verbatim mental projection of what the character-narrator has experienced. This could take the discussion further to distinguish different realisations of forms of narration such as the "interior monologue" and the "stream-of-consciousness" associated with Modernist literature (cf. Canani *et al.* 2017, pp. 146-151). Once again, by starting from below, i.e., from the lexicogrammatical features, the analysis reaches the more abstract qualities of literature (Miller 2021).

4. Modality and the interactive game

Finally, one last example, (5), is given to illustrate principles of language as interaction and modal assessment (Halliday, Matthiessen 2014, pp. 183-186). This is the incipit of the 1908 novel by E.M. Forster *A Room with a View* and the focus is on the dialogue. Starting from the lexicogrammar, the analysis can aim at the semantics of modal meanings construed in exchanges and the various types of speech acts, exemplified in the dialogue between Lucy and her cousin.

5.   PART ONE
Chapter I: The Bertolini
'The Signora had no business to do it,' said Miss Bartlett, 'no business at all. She promised us south rooms with a view close together, instead of which here are north rooms, looking into a courtyard, and a long way apart. Oh, Lucy!'
'And a Cockney, besides!' said Lucy, who had been further saddened by the Signora's unexpected accent. 'It might be London.' [...] 'Charlotte, don't you feel, too, that we might be in London? I can hardly believe that all kinds of other things are just outside. I suppose it is one's being so tired.'
'This meat has surely been used for soup,' said Miss Bartlett, laying down her fork.
'I wanted so to see the Arno. The rooms the Signora promised us in her letter would have looked over the Arno. The Signora had no business to do it at all. Oh, it is a shame!'

'Any nook does for me,' Miss Bartlett continued; 'but it does seem hard that you shouldn't have a view.'

Lucy felt that she had been selfish. 'Charlotte, you mustn't spoil me: of course, you must look over the Arno, too. I meant that. The first vacant room in the front –' 'You must have it,' said Miss Bartlett, part of whose travelling expenses were paid by Lucy's mother – a piece of generosity to which she made many a tactful allusion.

'No, no. You must have it.'

'I insist on it. Your mother would never forgive me, Lucy.'

'She would never forgive me.'

The ladies' voices grew animated, and – if the sad truth be owned – a little peevish. They were tired, and under the guise of unselfishness they wrangled. Some of their neighbours interchanged glances, and one of them – one of the ill-bred people whom one does meet abroad – leant forward over the table and actually intruded into their argument. He said:

'I have a view, I have a view.'

The sequence of modal verbs and associated grammatical subjects in the dialogues express, first, Lucy's disappointment with the Englishness of the Pensione Bertolini ("it might", "we might"), then, the polite bickering over the room and her cousin Charlotte's willingness to give her a room with a view, with modulation of the obligation kind ("you shouldn't", "you mustn't", "you must", "you must", "you must"...). The firmness of her offer, or rather command, is marked by the verbal process "insist" and by more modal verbs and adverbs combined with a speech act of forgiveness ("Your mother would never forgive me, she would never forgive me"). The forms of obligation (second person subject with modal verb "must") make the distinction between command and offer ambiguous and are dictated by features of the situation such as politeness and the social distance between the interactants.

The expression "had no business to do it" (reiterated three times by Charlotte) means "had no right to do it" and can be considered a quasi-modal expression equivalent to "shouldn't have done it" to make a complaint. The complaint is triggered by another speech act, a promise, which, by remaining unfulfilled, can only cause the two ladies' frustration and complaint ("promised us" repeated twice). The modal adverb "surely", expressing objective probability and reinforcing an indirect speech act of complaining, and the subjective probability of "I suppose" attached

to the statement "it is one's being so tired" contribute to the depiction of the characters and sarcasm of the exchange. Other elements of the exchange contribute to the interactive game, e.g., the vocatives "Charlotte" and "Lucy" and the exclamations "Oh Lucy!", "Oh, it is a shame!", which are minor speech acts and thus part of the language of interaction, "verbal gestures of the speaker addressed to no one in particular, although they may, of course, call for empathy on the part of the addressee" (Halliday, Matthiessen 2014, p. 196).

The negotiation in the dialogue is interrupted by the intrusion of Mr Emerson ("I have a view, I have a view") which corresponds to a turn in the events narrated. Altogether, the modal meanings and interaction at the beginning of the novel help establish the backdrop to the plot, one in which a contrast is built between Lucy's emancipation and the morals of middle-upper-class English society. This contrast and its development throughout the book could take the discussion into the concepts of "significant textual location", "foregrounding" and "symbolic articulation" typical of the semiotic system of verbal art (cf. Miller 2021, pp. 74-75).

5. Conclusion

In this paper I paid homage to one of the lessons that stayed with me of the work done by Professor Donna R. Miller at the University of Bologna during my five years there, and that is the possible synergy of language and literature in the context of EFL teaching and learning. Bridging the gap between language and literature to facilitate language development, an SFL-inspired approach to literature brings to the fore the notion of the literature text as one special register of language, where the various functions performed by the writer's lexicogrammatical choices serve a higher symbolic purpose, have artistic value and contribute to conveying some universal theme, whatever this might be (social inequality, pain, search for happiness, individual emancipation, love relations, crime and punishment, etc.). This approach looks at lexicogrammatical traces of the text theme to grasp its deeper meanings and universal significance.

With her analyses of appraisal, symbolic articulation and foregrounding in various literature texts, Donna has been digging into these symbolic meanings showing how a rigorous linguistic analysis can help the reader in their exploration and experience of the text and can help the language learner develop the necessary language awareness to fully appreciate litera-

ture. The list of topics that could be introduced in the EFL classroom could be expanded to include several others (e.g., Atticus's description in (3) could be analysed for the inscribing of appraisal-judgment, the reference to Cockney in (5) could stimulate discussion on cultural diversity and dialect variation and perception) to capture the highest layer of meaning-making, the context of culture. However, following in the paths Donna has traced, I have tried to show that the SFL model of language semiosis intertwining the global dimensions of context and meaning potential and the local dimensions of lexicogrammar captures well the higher order semiosis of literature texts that are meant to convey universal values. In turn, literature text provides a means of approaching language learning in a holistic way by drawing together grammar, vocabulary, usage and culture, it responds to the SFL emphasis on meaning embedded in and not separable from situational and cultural context, promotes higher level literacy and ultimately crosses disciplinary boundaries and knowledge divisions, thus has enhanced educational value.

To conclude, I use once again Halliday's words on the role of literature and storytelling in education to stress the power of imagination activated by literature "In the imaginative or innovative context they [the parent and the child] are together exploring some realm of experience, perhaps through stories or imaginative literature of one kind or another" (Halliday 2007, p. 87). If the literature-language pair works for parent-child education, it will also work for adult EFL learners, hopefully triggering imagination and bringing about innovation.

Appendix: literary sources

Coe J. (1990), *The Dwarves of Death*, Fourth Estate, London.

Forster E.M. (1908), *A Room with a View*, Arnold, London.

Lee H. (1982), *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Warner Books, New York.

McCarthy C. (2006), *The Road*, Vintage, New York.