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Communicating the ineffable. A pragmatic account of literariness

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Abstract

The notion of literature or poetry is based on the intuition that there is a qualitative difference between "literary" and other kinds of discourses. Only recently have philosophers of language and pragmaticists begun to acknowledge this qualitative difference.

Within the ostensive-inferential framework of Relevance Theory, I will characterize expressive discourse (in the sense of intuitively "poetic", literary", "creative") as based on a recognizable informative intention that triggers a specific process of interpretation in which the recovery of the proposition expressed is not sufficiently relevant in and of itself, and non propositional cognitive effects are derived through (i) creative imagination (ii) appreciation of the *shape* of the text as a special kind of "object": namely, a verbal ostensive artifact: as it is quite evident that formal and stylistic aspects such as alliteration, rhyme and hyperbaton do not affect propositional meaning, and that they are produced intentionally, they must have a cognitive function; and (iii) integrating private, idiosyncratic information in the context of interpretation.

The point of interpreting expressive discourse is not (or not only) to derive a representation that can be believed or rejected and/ or embedded into other informative intentions: the cognitive effects we derive from creative discourse are different *in kind*. I will illustrate my point by presenting a number of examples, to show how stylistic analysis can interact with pragmatics in explaining the cognitive effects we derive from creative discourse interpretation.

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1. Introduction

Recognizing and appreciating a different quality in discourse is arguably one of the basis of the very notion of poetry and literature, and consequently of different academic disciplines such as literary analysis and criticism. Still, the notion of literariness "hangs from a celestial hook" (Guijarro 1998: 77): there are no cognitive, psychologically sound explanations of the interpretation of literary texts. "Literariness" doesn't seem to reside in the text or discourse itself, nor be the result of a purely social convention, nor depend just on the interpretation of the reader/hearer. Thus, my aim is to explain how a literary interpretation is triggered and to characterize it in cognitive terms, as a result of a process of interpretation.

Philosophers of language have not given enough importance to this question until recently, while literary analysts and critics are not explicit on the status of literature as *a kind* of discourse, as a part of the much broader phenomenon of ostensive-inferential communication. Notwithstanding the specific notion of literature we call upon, literary discourse uses a specific language (with its peculiar phonological, semantic and morphosyntactic structure); as any discourse it refers to a context that needs to be -at least partially- accessible to the interpreter. In general terms, there is neither an explicit characterization of literature as a specific kind of discourse, nor a clear distinction between literary discourse and other kinds of discourse, such as (mainly) informative or directive ones.

Thus, it is important to consider first literary discourse in the framework of a general theory of communication that presents a psychologically plausible explanation of ostensive communication as a whole, in order to pinpoint its peculiarities, analyzing the cognitive basis involved and the processes triggered in the interpretation of intuitively "literary" discourses, as well as the cognitive effects derived thereby.

2. The notion of expressive discourse

I start by defining my object of study as expressive rather than literary discourse (Longhitano 2014), in order to clearly distinguish the pragmatic-cognitive from the sociocultural aspect, without diminishing the importance of the latter, whose role is that of providing a frame –namely, discursive context- for interpretation.

My aim is to characterizie this kind of discourse in terms of the attribution of a specific informative intention -i.e. expressive intention- that, like any other informative intention, can be prevalent in the text -as in prototypically literary texts (see appendix, 1, 5, 6, 7) - but it can also be secondary, auxiliary or embedded in other kind of intentions, which may prevail (see appendix, 2). I refer here to the attribution of an expressive intention that triggers an expressive interpretation, and not just to the discourse/ text itself or to the presence or frequency of specific linguistic or stylistic devices or intrinsically "poetic/ literary" words or syntagms. This attribution is based on relevant evidence which -as always in ostensive communication- is defeasible. On one hand there is situational-contextual evidence -relative to a judgment of adequation/ pertinence of such an intention to the content communicated in a given situation. On the other hand there is textual evidence, relative to the *shape*, the *quality* of the text as a whole, which in other kinds of discourses is normally determined by the individual abilities of the speaker and her preference to syntactically organize her discourse in a clear and effective way that minimizes the processing effort undertaken by the interpreter, sparing him unnecessary efforts.

Thus, I will analyze a wide range of discourses, from prototypically literary ones to cases in which the expressive intention seems to be intended "illegitimately" in order to confuse or deceive the interpreter (which gave rhetoric its bad name as a fundamentally deceitful discipline since its very foundation in Greco-Roman culture) - see appendix, 4-, through intermediate cases such as commercial advertisement -see appendix, 3-.

Prima facie, cognitive effects derived in expressive discourse interpretation seem to have three distinctive characteristics. First, they vary dramatically from one interpreter to another, and even for the same interpreter in different moments: the content of the propositional information derived is thus inherently vague and unpredictable, depending on the integration, in the context of interpretation, of personal, idiosyncratic information that is not represented as mutually accessible -not even in principle- and is subjectively relevant only for the interpreter.

Second, they seem to be irreducible to the propositional content of the utterance -as is generally the case in discourse interpretation-, producing cognitive effects that are different *in kind* as a result of a creative imagination process. Finally, they rely on the appreciation of formal-stylistic features, of the *shape* of the discourse, as if it were a special kind of object, an ostensive verbal artifact: a piece of art.

These strong, qualitative differences crucially depend on the integration into the context of interpretation of information that is not propositional and/or not mutually accessible, triggered by a specific representation of the informative intentions of the speaker, defined as expressive intention.

2.1. Two variables: intention attribution and context building

The first crucial aspect in my characterization of expressive discourse is the need to attribute to the speaker the intention of "communicating the ineffable" –namely, an expressive intention- by making relevant non-propositional cognitive effects, whose cognitive basis is experiential, and not inferential. The second crucial aspect is the construction of a context that is different *in kind* from other types of discourses.

In general, in discourse interpretation, the information integrated into the context is characterized as contextual assumptions (Sperber y Wilson 1986/ 1995: 107-108), i.e. information used in virtue of its propositional content; moreover, contextual assumptions should normally be represented as information common or shared in a way that is sufficient for the intentions of the communicators. If the scope of ostensive communication interpretation is for a hearer to derive the meaning that the speaker intended him to derive, a crucial aspect of the context is that it must be *mutually manifest*: available to both interlocutors, and representable as such. It does not need to be represented *exactly* the same way by the interlocutors, but the representations entertained by each interlocutor need to share enough analytic and synthetic implicatures: enough for the ends of the communication (Sperber & Wilson 1986/ 1995: 38-42).

Generally, attribution of informative intentions and context construction interact in a complex way without being causally chained in a mechanical sequence. In some cases, cultural contextual information relative to the (discursive or textual) genre may be activated first, guiding or constraining the attribution of a specific informative intention that is "inherent" to the genre itself. If I open a manual of geometry, I attribute to the author a specific informative intention and consequently adjust the concepts to which the words give access (e.g. "circle, or "parallel lines"). In other cases, attributing a specific informative intention to the speaker may happen 'on the fly', given textual and contextual evidence, with an implicit or explicit evaluation of the adequacy of the utterance to the communicative situation at stake.

In the case of expressive intention, recognizing the genre can trigger the attribution of an expressive intention, when (i) the genre is recognized and (ii) it is typically associated with expressive intention, such as in poetry (see appendix, 1). If the genre is not recognized, or if it is not prototypically associated with expressive intention, it is the insufficiency or irrelevance of the results of the regular interpretation process that, in combination with textual evidence, trigger an interpretation process based on creative imagination. Expressive interpretation takes into account the form, the *shape* of the text/discourse and relies on (propositional and non-propositional) private, idiosyncratic knowledge, that is represented as non-mutually manifest -nor, somehow, *manifestable*, in certain cases (Longhitano 2014: 163-169).

2.2. Attributing an expressive intention

According to Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson 1986/ 1995: 122-124) the interpretation of verbal-ostensive communication is always a matter of attributing the speaker (i) a general communicative intention, i.e. the very intention to communicate a certain amount of information ("the speaker intends that I should know that she intends...): ostensive communication is not an accidental matter, rather a purposeful intentional one. (ii) one or more specific informative intentions, nested within the general communicative intention, such as "the speaker intends me that I should know that she intends (Communicative intention) that I should know/ believe/ not believe that p (informative intention)", where p is the propositional content of the utterance, which can be assigned a truth value within a context C. In order to interpret expressive discourse, I postulate (Longhitano 2014: 84-86) the need

to attribute an expressive intention such as:

The speaker intends
　　that I should know
　　　　that she intends
　　　　　　that I should freely explore the conceptual areas evoked by her words, make my own
　　　　　　personal associations and include my own sensations, emotions, private memories and
　　　　　　opinions to represent
　　　　　　　　in which way it is (now for me) that
　　　　　　　　　　X

Where X is not the propositional content of the utterance, but exactly the utterance itself, as we will discuss further on.

3. Context building

In expressive discourse interpretation, the information that is integrated into the context of interpretation -and thus the resulting interpretation- seems to call upon private, personal, idiosyncratic subjective experiences -of the individual who communicates and of the individual who interprets-, to be based on the manner that each individual has developed for being in the world, for perceiving and feeling its phenomena, and particularly on her actual epistemic state. This is why it can be described as an attempt to verbally communicate the ineffable (Longhitano 2014).

According to Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson 1986/ 1995: 89-90, Carston 2002: 376-377), words give access to conceptual representations that constitute the encyclopedic knowledge of each subject. Moreover, discourse takes place within a physical, immediate context that represents a variable that is external to the system.

In general, in discourse interpretation, the information integrated into the context is characterized as contextual assumptions (Sperber & Wilson 1986/ 1995: 107-137), i.e. information used in virtue of its propositional content; nonetheless, in expressive discourse propositional content is not (sufficiently) relevant in and of itself.

Moreover, contextual assumptions should normally be represented as information sufficiently accessible to both interlocutors for the scope of the communication.

I argue that, like other general cognitive dispositions, even the cognitive disposition that retrieves and selects relevant information from the totality of world knowledge on a given subject is constrained by the current cognitive task at stake. In expressive discourse interpretation, the attribution of an expressive intention triggers the integration of a context that is wider, vaguer, at least partially idiosyncratic and private, qualitatively different from the context integrated in the interpretation of other kinds of discourses.

I describe the role of cultural information, characterizing a sub-conjunct -namely discursive context- of the context of interpretation as a more or less wide, coherent and stable set of pieces of cultural information, that may be represented implicitly -as a belief- or explicitly -as information embedded in a metarrepresentation, such as "Catholics believe that p". This set includes explicit or implicit information related with the appropriate form of the text, and about its adequacy to a determinate communicative situation. In some cases, discursive context implies recognizing a discursive genre -e.g. a formal phone call, a newspaper article, a commercial advertisement- thus producing much more precise expectations about the possible relevance of the text. This is what makes us recognize (implicitly or explicitly) a sonnet as a lyric poetic genre, preparing us for an expressive interpretation by default (Longhitano 2014, 67-77). The above does not imply that identifying the discursive genre is strictly necessary to attribute an expressive intention: nonetheless, the activation of this set of pieces of cultural information guides and constrains the search for relevance (Unger 2006).

3.1. Invocation and evocation in context contruction

I propose that there are two different routes -though not mutually exclusive- for constructing context in discourse interpretation. A regular or systemic one, based on the invocation of (sufficiently) stable propositional

information, based on lexical knowledge and represented as sufficiently mutually manifest, which is processed by a truly inferential process; and an expressive one, based on the evocation of different kinds of information -both propositional and non-propositional information, such as imagination and emotions that are based on a common *experience* of the world as it comes to us through our senses, and as it is re-elaborated in our personal and private imagination. This information is manipulated not only by inferential processes but also by other processes, particularly associative and creative, imaginative ones. I accept the distinction between invocation and evocation as it has been proposed by Dan Sperber (1975/ 2007), but I am more precise about what triggers evocation. Sperber limits himself to the suggestion that evocation is triggered by the insufficiency or irrelevance of the result of a regular, process based on invocation, I propose instead that this process depends on the attribution of a specific informative intention, as has been outlined above (Longhitano 2014: 80-86).

I characterize the role of non-propositional information in expressive discourse interpretation: sensations and emotions that are not passively retrieved from memory but constructed on-line, as a result of a process of creative imagination (Thomas 2010, Barsalou et al. 2003, Wilson-Mendenhall et al. 2011). In expressive discourse interpretation, a general cognitive disposition -creative imagination- is applied to a particular object: a discourse/ text. As in other cases, a general cognitive disposition is both boosted and constrained by the specificity of the input -a linguistic ostensive one-, the scope of the process involved (discourse interpretation and production) and by interacting with its specific subcomponents (such as phonology, semantics and syntax) and its processing rules. Philosophic, pragmatic, and cognitive science theories about the interaction between world knowledge, language and communication, even though sometimes admitting the existence of non-propositional representations (Sperber 2007 [1975], Carston 2010), normally concentrate only on propositional ones. Even though the latter are certainly the main input and output of ostensive verbal communication, they are not the only ones. In the same fashion, the role of establishing a common ground (however one defines it in detail) in communication has been rightly emphasized.

3.2. Private, idiosyncratic information: egocentric interpretation

Moreover, I characterize the role of propositional information that is represented as non-mutually manifest -nor *manifestable*- private, idiosyncratic, and relevant only for the individual that develops it. Only very recently within Relevance Theory the role of private, not mutually manifest information in epistemic vigilance tasks has been discussed (Sperber *et al.* 2010). The latter is defined as part of a social theory of argumentation and reasoning, where private, idiosyncratic knowledge has the role of evaluating the reliability of the communicator, and of the content of her utterance. Evidently, in expressive discourse interpretation, the reliability of the source and/ or the content of the utterance cannot be evaluated in terms of their propositional content; it is from our private knowledge that we evaluate (i) the adequacy of the context expressed to the content communicated and to the communicative situation: not every kind of content can be communicated expressively, and this is not for cognitive reasons but for cultural ones. For the same reasons, it is not appropriate to communicate an expressive intention in every communicative situation. Moreover, (ii) the form of the text can be (implicitly or explicitly) evaluated, that is, the personal and unique expressive abilities of the communicator.

As a consequence of the above, in expressive discourse interpretation the interpreter feels *authorized* -given his representation of the expressive intention of the speaker- to perform a kind of egocentric interpretation, that is, he can legitimately search for the relevance of the text/ discourse with regard to his own actual epistemic state -that includes perceptions and emotions, by considering the expressive text/ discourse as an artifact, a work of art, more than a piece of regular ostensive-inferential communication. The egocentric interpretation I describe is a very complex, embedded representation.

4. The text as an ostensive-verbal artifact

Expressive discourse can be described as a special kind of object, an ostensive verbal artifact, a text/discourse with a special *shape*, made with the intention of triggering an evocative interpretation in order to communicate the ineffable, implies the characterization of the process of appreciation of the *shape* of the text/ discourse, that affects

the interpretation in an entirely non-propositional way.

To discuss textual evidence, I use pragmatic notions such as incongruity (Curcó 1997: 231) and notions borrowed from literary criticism -like linguistic tension and deviation (Spitzer 1948). My aim is to establish the cognitive basis beyond the intuitions that literary critics have about text *quality*. I refer to "textual evidence" and not to "proofs" that make possible to consider the text as an artifact, in order to mark the importance of a holistic process that considers the overall *shape* of the text, as no evidence is sufficient by itself. Thus (i) this process is defeasible, as any pragmatic process: we can be wrong, or be misled on purpose (see appendix, 4), in the attribution of an expressive intention, and (ii) the attribution of an expressive intention is a holistic process, a complex one, being the result of a unique combination of different factors, involving the *shape* and the content of the text as an unique combination of interdependent elements; the text considered in the context of cultural information, as a communicative situation and especially as part of a genre; the evaluation of its adequacy with respect to the latter is a dialectic, dynamic relationship. It is useful to establish an analogy with other kinds of works of art: in a sculpture or a painting it is impossible to separate the shape from the matter; in listening to a symphony there is no point in separating the notes from the instruments or voice that executes them every time it is played. The final result can be achieved by an infinite number of combinations, at least in part culturally determined.

5. Conclusions

Expressive discourse interpretation is an active, creative and highly conscious activity, producing cognitive effects which are irreducible to the propositional meaning of the utterance, to the inferential process, and, *a fortiori*, to any linguistic device *per se*. Evocation needs to be triggered by the explicit or implicit attribution of an expressive intention. It may depend in the first place on the explicit or implicit identification of a discursive/ textual genre, as in lyric poetry or tales (see appendix, 1, 6 and 7). The latter, without being strictly necessary, typically guides the search for relevance, triggering more precise expectations (Unger 2006). Nonetheless, expressive intention may not be the only or prevalent one in the text/ discourse in discussion and/ or not be typically associated to the genre of the text (or the genre may not be familiar: see appendix, 5) and/ or to the actual communicative situation (see appendix, 2 and 4): we can find expressive utterings or paragraphs in many kinds of text or discourse. In this case, expressive interpretation is triggered by the failure -or insufficiency- of the inferential interpretation strategy, together with a fast and frugal evaluation of the adequacy of expressive intention to the current communicative situation. Finally, the presence of textual evidence makes the text/discourse an object, an ostensive verbal artifact whose shape is important in itself, affecting the overall result of the interpretation.

Appendix

1. Soldiers

There we are like
in autumn
on trees
the leaves

(Courton Woods, July 1918)

(G. Ungaretti, "Soldati". In Ungaretti, Giuseppe (1969). "Soldati". In *Tutte le poesie*. Milano, Mondadori. My translation)

2. This is not a menu for the adventurous. Every single main course, from the choucroute garni through the onglet to the braised trotter and sweetbreads (…) was welcome for being so blindingly obvious. **Duck confit was every middle-class Englishman's Dordogne holiday.**" (Jay Rainer, restaurant review in the Food section of *The Guardian* newspaper. http://www.london-eating.co.uk/critics/jay-rayner.htm. November 12 2012. Bolds are mine).

3. I'm absolutely *Palacio* (*Soy totalmente Palacio:* the advertisement of *El Palacio de Hierro*, a big department store in Mexico, such as Harrods'. My translation. Fall 2012).

4. The Senate is in every part of Mexico. Every part of Mexico is in the Senate. (*El Senado está en todo México. Todo México está en el Senado*. Advertisement of the mexican Senate on the radio, spring 2013. My translation.).

5.

Willow branches bend
with the river current
ducks drift backwards.

(English *haiku* by Martin Lucas, http://www.haiku.insouthsea.co.uk/english.htm, february 26 2013)

6.

A sepal, a petal, and a thorn
Upon a common summer's morn —
A flask of Dew — A Bee or two —
A Breeze — a caper in the trees —
And I'm a Rose!

(Emily Dickinson, J19. In Dickinson, Emily (1960). *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* . Boston: Little, Brown & Co.

7. In eighteenth--century France there lived a man who was one of the most gifted and abominable personages in an era that knew no lack of gifted and abominable personages. (...)
In the period of which we speak, there reigned in the cities a stench barely conceivable to us modern men and women. The streets stank of manure, the courtyards of urine, the stairwells stank of mouldering wood and rat droppings, the kitchens of spoiled cabbage and mutton fat; the unaired parlours stank of stale dust, the bedrooms of greasy sheets, damp featherbeds, and the pungently sweet aroma of chamber pots.
The stench of sulphur rose from the chimneys, the stench of caustic lyes from the tanneries, and from the slaughterhouses came the stench of congealed blood. People stank of sweat and unwashed clothes; from their mouths came the stench of rotting teeth, from their bellies that of onions, and from their bodies, if they were no longer very young, came the stench of rancid cheese and sour milk and tumorous disease. The rivers stank, the marketplaces stank, the churches stank, it stank beneath the bridges and in the palaces. The peasant stank as did the priest, the apprentice as did his master's wife, the whole of the aristocracy stank, even the king himself stank, stank like a rank lion, and the queen like an old goat, summer and winter. For in the eighteenth century there was nothing to hinder bacteria busy at decomposition, and so there was no human activity, either constructive or destructive, no manifestation of germinating or decaying life that was not accompanied by stench. (*Incipit* of P. Süskind, *Perfume. The story of a murderer* (1986). New York, Alfred A. Knopf, p. 1)

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