LITERARY PRAGMATICS

EDITED BY ROGER D. SELL

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

NILS ERIK ENKVIST has been Professor of English Language and Literature, and Distinguished Professor of Style and Text, at Åbo Akademi University; Research Professor in the Academy of Finland; Leader of the Text Linguistics Research Group, and of the Research Group on Style and Text; Vice-Chancellor of Åbo Akademi University; and Director of the Research Institute of the Åbo Akademi Foundation. He has lectured widely, has held visiting posts at the Folger Library, UCLA, Clare Hall (Cambridge), and Purdue University, and has received major prizes and honorary doctorates. He has served as President of the Societas Linguistica Europaea, is currently President of the Féderation Internationale des Langues et Littératures Modernes and President of the Modern Humanities Research Association, and is playing a leading role in the Academia Europaea.

RICHARD J. WATTS is Professor of English at the University of Berne, having earlier taught at the universities of Zurich and Fribourg. Among his books is one on the pragmalinguistic analysis of narrative texts, and he has written widely on pragmatics, particularly in questions of cross-cultural communication; he is General Editor of *Multilingua: Journal of Cross-cultural and Interlanguage Communication*. Another special interest is politeness, on which he is editing a selection of papers.

ADRIAN PILKINGTON is Lecturer in English at St Mary's College, Strawberry Hill, having previously taught at universities in Italy (L'Aquila), the Soviet Union (Yerevan and Moscow), and the Basque country (Vitoria). At present he is working on a doctoral thesis in the Linguistics Department of University College, London. Its aim is to discuss poetic effects in terms of relevance theory as developed by Sperber and Wilson.

MEIR STERNBERG is Professor of Poetics and Comparative Literature at Tel Aviv University. He has written extensively on problems of narrative, which he sees as a social discourse conducted in particular historical circumstances. One of his special interests has been in the relationship between narrative and ideology, above all as represented by the Bible.

PETER VERDONK is Reader in the English Department at the University of Amsterdam after earlier careers in business and grammar school teaching. He has been a key member of the Poetics and Linguistics Association, and his interests in literary stylistics have moved from a predominantly structuralist to a pragmaticist position. He is currently working on discourse analysis and is writing the eighteenth century chapter of a book on the history of literary English. He is also editing a volume of stylistic studies of modern poetry.

GERARD J. STEEN holds a post with the Dutch Organization for Scientific Research in the Department of General Literary Studies at the Free University, Amsterdam, and is working on a doctoral thesis on the understanding of metaphor in literature. He has published papers on related issues, and has co-edited books on decadence and on the historical novel and historiography. He studied at Birmingham University and the Free University, and has taught at the latter university and at the State University of Utrecht.

WILLIE VAN PEER is Reader in the Department of Literary Theory at the University of Utrecht, having earlier taught at the University of Tilburg. His current research concentrates on epistemological problems in literary theory, and he has recently edited a collection of papers on the relationships between language, literature and culture and co-edited a collection on stylistics and pragmatics. One result of his empirical studies is a book on stylistics and psychology.

ZIVA BEN-PORAT is on the faculty of the Department of Poetics and Comparative Literature at Tel Aviv University. Her major fields of research are intertextuality, popular culture, and cognitive poetics. It is in this last field that she has developed her interest in the relationship between cultural concepts and literary representations.

CLAES SCHAAR has been Professor of English Language and

Literature at Lund University. He has written on Old English poetry, Chaucer, and the sonnets of Shakespeare and Daniel. His interests in contextualization, intertextuality, and pragmatics are reflected in recent books on Marino-Crashaw's *Sospetto d'Herode* and on *Paradise Lost*.

BALZ ENGLER is Professor of English at the University of Basel, having also taught at the universities of Geneva and East Anglia. His scholarly interests centre on the relationship between literature, its performance, and its cultural implications. He has translated *Othello* into German, written books on Shakespeare translations and on the relationship between poetic texts and their modes of communicating, and edited a volume on community drama. He is on the board of the Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft West, and is President of the Swiss Association for Theatre Studies.

JEROME J. McGANN is Commonwealth Professor of English at the University of Virginia. He has recently completed a five volume project on the theoretical and methodological grounding for a new socio-historical hermeneutics. He is also the editor of the New Oxford English Texts edition of Byron's *Complete Poetical Works* in seven volumes, and has written two books on Byron and numerous articles on nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature. He is currently working on a pair of related studies of contemporary writing.

ROGER D. SELL is Enkvist's successor as Professor of English Language and Literature at Åbo Akademi University, having previously held the Chair of English Literature at Gothenburg University. He also teaches literary theory at the University of Helsinki, and has been affiliated with Uppsala University, Wolfson College (Cambridge), and the University of Virginia. Having published on British and American writers of different periods, for five or six years he has been developing literary pragmatics. He now leads the Literary Pragmatics Project of the Academy of Finland.

ERNEST W.B. HESS-LÜTTICH is Professor of German at the Free University of Berlin, and has taught at London, Madison, and Bloomington. He has published extensively on problems of text theory and sociolinguistics, communication and pragmatics, devoting particular attention to drama.

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To
Nils Erik Enkvist

LITERARY PRAGMATICS

An Introduction

Roger D. Sell

THE BACKGROUND OF IDEAS

In 1987 plans were afoot in Åbo for the setting up of a research project in literary pragmatics. As a way of launching operations and collecting ideas as to possible lines of enquiry, a symposium was planned for 2–4 September 1988. A number of scholars were invited to submit written statements on particular aspects of literary pragmatics and to come and discuss them in Åbo. The scholars and their assigned topics were carefully chosen: from the outset the hope was that the views put forward would complement each other in ways sufficiently interesting to warrant joint publication as a book. During the deliberations of the symposium it seemed that this hope was being realized. The participants accordingly agreed to revise their statements in the light of the discussion, and it is now my pleasure to present them.

The symposium's sponsors were the British Council, the Research Institute of the Åbo Akademi Foundation, and the Academy of Finland's newly established Literary Pragmatics Project, which is based in the English department of Åbo Akademi University. The simplest way to introduce this collection is as an initiative of that department, a method which will require a brief historical retrospect.

During a period when chairs of English at other universities were often specialized in English language or English literature, at Åbo Akademi Nils Erik Enkvist was Professor of English Language and Literature, and was pioneering a linguistic stylistics of broad potential. When Enkvist was called to a Distinguished Professorship of Style and Text in the same department, the title of his former chair remained unchanged, so valuable and distinctive

was a wide-ranging interdisciplinarity of approach felt to be. The Literary Pragmatics Project, and the idea for the papers published here, bear this same hallmark.

All too often the world's language specialists and literature specialists, when they have talked to each other, have talked at cross purposes. Scholars trying to bring the two sides together have sometimes been accused of understanding neither, and the situation is complicated by the further sub-specializations of language study and literary study alike. Language study comprises everything from hard-core linguistics to conversation analysis, and literary study everything from humanistic criticism to deconstruction. With linguists not talking to linguists and literary scholars not talking to literary scholars, there has been some temptation to drop all dialogue and defensively cultivate one's own little patch.

Such divisiveness and despair have not been universal, however. That they never set in at the English department of Åbo Akademi was due to a particular configuration of circumstances. For one thing, the department is a foreign-language department, so that linguistic aspects of literary texts would in any case receive some attention. For another, it is still a small department, and that much more likely to hold together intellectually. Most important of all, it has been led for many years by a man of rare qualities – and not only qualities of leadership.

Interdisciplinarity has been part of Enkvist's mind-style from early on. His first degree was a master's in linguistics from Ann Arbor, Michigan, but his Helsinki doctoral thesis was on caricatures of Americans on the English stage prior to 1870, which was followed by books on American humour in England and on the motif of the seasons in medieval literature. Enkvist is in fact one of the few great polymaths of contemporary scholarship, making it his business to know what is going on within a wide range of traditions, and establishing personal contacts with their representatives in many countries. He is exceptionally well equipped to see the virtues of different approaches, and their points of common ground. And it is to him that the present volume of papers is gratefully dedicated. Without the special kind of inspiration he has always given, they would never have been commissioned in the first place.

Enkvist's stylistics always emphasized the relationship between language use and context, and in more recent years he has developed a text linguistics which sees entire processes of pro-

duction and reception as specific to particular sociocultural, situational, and interactional circumstances. This emphasis on contextualization is of course in tune with developments in recent philosophy of language and in several branches of linguistics. One thinks of speech-act theory, discourse and conversation analysis, pragmatics, anthropological linguistics, psycholinguistics, and sociolinguistics. Contextualization, in short, especially when developed by a scholar of Enkvist's range, is a flag which several different types of linguist would readily salute.

By the 1980s, however, contextualization could also serve as a rallying point for different species of literary scholar. Many scholars, partly in reaction to the still influential formalist approaches to literature, and to the more recent deconstructionist ones as well, were in various ways extending their attention beyond the words on the page. There was much discussion, sometimes within a Marxist framework, of how texts, as the result of sociocultural forces, come to be designated as literary in the first place (see Eagleton 1983: 1–16). 'New' historians (e.g. Greenblatt 1980) were developing fascinating and unexpected aspects of the consubstantiality of literary texts with the cultures in which they are written and read, and even the more traditional historical approach was renewing itself, not least by establishing closer links between the tasks of the bibliographer and the critic: the literary text's circumstances of publication were now being brought into the very centre of the interpretative arena (see McGann 1985). Somewhat similarly, *Rezeptionsästhetik* was relativizing the significance of literary works to the horizons of expectations of particular audiences (see Jauss 1982), while German and Dutch empirical literary scientists were busily testing the responses of real readers (see Schmidt 1980, 1982a, 1982b). Last, but by no means least, the west's discovery of Bakhtin (e.g. Bakhtin 1981) was leading to insights into the relationships between the languages of literature and the wide range of sociolects – the 'heteroglossia' – operative within any language community.

The next question was: If contextualization can open up dialogues between linguist and linguist and between literary scholar and literary scholar, can it not also bring linguist and literary scholar on to speaking terms with each other? Literary pragmatics, at least as it figured in discussions between Enkvist and myself, is based on the belief that it can.

From the Russian Formalists onwards, a main stumbling block

for many attempts to unite linguistics and poetics was in their argument, explicit or implicit, that language is the material from which literature is made, and that literary categories are therefore predetermined by, and even coextensive with, hard-core linguistic categories. Taken to extremes, this resulted in those 'bottom-up' analyses of literary texts which loaded every phoneme with definite artistic significance. Linguists could easily tire of it, since it involved little more than exhaustive descriptions. Literary scholars could easily feel that it represented a positivism blind to larger and more subtle organizations and effects, including some of those in which language played a significant part.

The promise of literary pragmatics, on the other hand, lies in its inclusion of a 'top-down' perspective from the very start. Drawing on Enkvist's account of the contextualization of text (see ch. 1 below), Bakhtin's sociological poetics (see Sell 1986a), and Fowler's account of literature as social discourse (Fowler 1981), it sees the writing and reading of literary texts as interactive communication processes. Like all such processes, literary writing and reading, even though they do not function face-to-face, one-to-one or even contemporaneously with each other, are inextricably linked with the particular sociocultural contexts within which they take place. Literary pragmatics takes for granted that no account of communication in general will be complete without an account of literature and its contextualization, and that no account of literature will be complete without an account of its use of the communicative resources generally available. In effect, it reinstates the ancient linkage between rhetoric and poetics, and in a way that could well be of lasting importance for language scholars and literary scholars alike, strict demarcations between whom may one day be seen as a mere mid-twentieth-century aberration. It is *not* basically a type of literary scholarship which borrows theories and techniques from a separate discipline of linguistics, and it is *not* basically a type of linguistic scholarship which uses literary texts as examples. It is, or aspires to be, at one and the same time both literary and linguistic. It centres on what we have come to call literary texts, but it does not fundamentally distinguish the communication between literary writers and their readers from any other type of communication.

Enkvist's paper is the natural place at which to start reading the present collection, clearly stating the reasons for not making such distinctions. All language processing involves syntactic intelligi-

bility, semantic comprehensibility, and pragmatic interpretability, this last being a matter of the interpreter's ability to build around the text a world in which it makes sense. All hermeneutic incongruities arise because interpreters with different backgrounds and in different circumstances have this ability to different degrees, and the worlds they build differ as well. For all uses of language, impressions as to the vagueness or specificness of the words, or as to their ambiguousness or unambiguousness, are likewise the impressions of particular recipients, who can perceive them in different ways. Nor are judgements about the literariness or otherwise of a text any less conditional. Literature is a relative and social concept, and feelings about the value of texts arise, not simply as a result of characteristics of the text, but through the operation of such characteristics within the particular social system of evaluative overtones embraced by the reader. Literary pragmatics, Enkvist concludes, entails a process aesthetics, which will trace the dynamic reciprocity of text and interpreter within a given historical situation.

DIFFERENCES OF EMPHASIS

Yet just as with pragmatics in general, so with a more specifically literary pragmatics, no account of theory, scope, and method can at present be definitive. The symposium, far from aiming at uniformity, was a pilot operation, and papers were invited from scholars who, complementing each other in sex, age, country of origin, and interests, would be likely to raise some of the necessary questions. Unfortunately only one woman scholar was able to accept, but good mixes of age and nationality were achieved, and there certainly were some interesting differences of approach.

Much of the time these may have been little more than a matter of focus. As already mentioned, any literary pragmatics must include a top-down perspective from the start: the pragmaticist knows that he will be relating whatever aspects of the text he selects for discussion to the world in which the text functions communicatively. Though symposium participants seemed keen to embrace this in principle, it may now be necessary to add the qualification that the pragmaticist relates text and world *sooner or later*. At least on present showing, some contributors seem to think more immediately about the communicative world, while others seem to think more immediately about the text.

A notable example of the world-first tendency is the paper by Richard J. Watts, who, like Enkvist, very much stresses the social relativity of literariness. A person's judgements about literature develop as part of the larger process of education and socialization within a particular community, and Watts makes a strong case for empirical research of a non-quantitative and interdisciplinary kind into the cultural misunderstandings that can arise for particular readers of particular foreign-language poetry – in his example, Swiss-German readers of English poetry. Not the least of the paper's merits is in suggesting what one might call the educational and internationalist potential of literary pragmatics. The cross-cultural study of expectations about literature opens up entire communal value systems.

As for the text-first tendency, the main examples would perhaps be the papers by Adrian Pilkington, Meir Sternberg, and Peter Verdonk. Pilkington focuses his discussion of relevance theory on a single poem by Frost, in no small part drawing on his own linguistic introspection. Sternberg, investigating the linguistic, representational, and perspectival ambiguities of reported speech, applies his own intellect to a range of detailed textual examples. And Verdonk, who does not wish 'to forfeit the possibility of investigating the formal features of the written text as a possible source of meaning', patiently scrutinizes a short poem by Larkin, registering features such as inanimate subjects, deixis, puns, and allusions.

Pilkington, Sternberg, and Verdonk may be the literary pragmaticists Gerard Steen has in mind when he wonders whether a strict division of labour might be necessary between literary pragmatics and empirical literary science. According to this, literary pragmaticists would be idealists and have no interest in real readers, whereas empirical literary scientists, such as Steen himself, would be carrying out psychological research into the responses of particular readers. Yet Pilkington and company would hardly deny the complementary value of comparing their own readings with the accounts of other real readers, and they all accept the principle of pragmatic reference to the communicative world. Pilkington's discussion of Frost begins by describing the reactions of two earlier commentators, and he is at pains to emphasize the importance of a quite separate literary criticism whose practitioners' naturally arising responses can be fed in to the literary pragmaticist's research. Sternberg, who has argued so impressively that biblical

narratives are social discourses realizing particular sets of communicative purposes in historical situations (Sternberg 1985), is working within the same framework here. With Enkvist, he takes for granted that poetics conducts itself like the analysis of any other live discourse process. Thus we disambiguate reported speech in literature by working towards what seems the best interpretative fit achievable in the prevailing circumstances. And Verdonk, whose entire argument has to do with the way in which the poem's text becomes a discourse drawing in its readers, would positively insist that readers have to be talked about in the plural. Larkin's own stated poetics, which assumes a uniformity of understanding between the poet and all his readers, is too simplistic.

Turning things round the other way for a moment, even an out-and-out empiricist must presumably devote introspective study to his chosen texts. How else can he set up his hypothesis for empirical investigation or locate those features whose reception he wishes to test – metaphors, in Steen's case? This means that the main difference between him and Pilkington and company will remain little more than the question of priorities: he is already talking more about people, whereas they are still talking more about texts. Most contributors would probably agree with Watts, who says that two rather different kinds of approach are in order:

> Literary pragmatics must concern itself with textual meanings beyond the linguistic structure of the literary text itself, *either* in the inward-looking way . . . (i.e. 'the study of deixis . . ., implicature, presupposition, speech acts, and aspects of discourse structure' . . .), *or* by looking outwards towards aspects of the sociocultural affiliation of authors/readers and the complexities of literary communication beyond simplistic assumptions of message transference by means of a code through a channel . . . from a sender . . . to a receiver . . .
>
> (p. 27, Sell's italics)

Steen is the only contributor to suggest even for a moment that literary pragmatics and empirical research into reader cognition might be irreconcilable, and subsequently he too emphasizes that there is actually much common ground. His constructivist account of reading, in giving no less emphasis to the role of the metaphor-comprehender than to the metaphor's own linguistic structure or semantic anomaly, is very close to Enkvist, and like most other

contributors he dissociates himself from the essentialist view that literary texts are 'inherently literary'.

Even where the text-first tendency did perhaps begin to have deeper implications, the differences of approach were by no means straightforward. Pilkington, it is true, did seem less than convinced of the social relativity of the concept of literature, claiming, rather, to espouse an essentialist account. He may also seem to have implied that his essentialist literary categories are coextensive with certain linguistics ones, and unchangingly so. He did argue, after all, that the most poetic metaphors will always be the ones which have the widest range of weak implicatures, whereas other participants would argue that 'George is a wheelbarrow' will seem poetic only within a particular co-textual organization and communicative context. On the other hand Pilkington makes no bones about the difficulty of reconciling linguistics and poetics within the framework of Russian Formalism, and his critique here clearly emphasizes that the question of what constitutes significant overt behaviour – linguistic behaviour in this case – 'can only be determined by appeals to people's ideas about what is significant', a point which, like my own earlier remark on the Russian Formalists, firmly entails the literary pragmaticist's top-down perspective. Given this, it is highly unlikely that Pilkington's thinking on text would be too narrowly text-based. And in fact, of course, implicature, which plays such a central role in his approach, is not a hard-core linguistic concept but, precisely, a pragmatic one. He duly notes that not all readers of a text derive the same implicatures from it.

Again, Steen's charge of idealism may have at least some bearing on the paper by Willie van Peer. Van Peer is aiming at a descriptive definition of literature which will cover literary characteristics ontologically present in literary texts from every period of every culture. He thinks of the readers of literature as a timeless 'we', insists that literature is a matter of frozen text rather than live discourse, and forcefully states a number of related arguments: that literature has nothing to do with labour, power or wealth, and is not a social institution; that literature uses language in special ways; and that one of its main functions is to provide reflectiveness and pleasure. Yet on the other hand, van Peer himself has done much to pioneer the kind of empirical work practised by Steen, and his paper is eloquent on literature's ability to shape a cultural tradition and foster group cohesion. By applying to literature the etymologi-

cal sense of the term 'homiletical', he actually seeks to place it on a par with familiar, conversable, sociable discourse, and is well able to accommodate oral texts as part of the same phenomenon.

THE CENTRAL GROUND

Differences there were, then, but not always of a finally divisive kind, and they should in any case be weighed against the broad agreement on a number of central issues. Most contributors seemed ready to endorse arguments for the social relativity of the concept of literature, for the connection between literature and structures of ideology and power, and for the formal and functional similarities between literary and other linguistic usage. Furthermore, though not denying that their own purposes sometimes compel them to have recourse to intuition, they would aspire to balance this with a firmly based historical sense, and would not accept the timeless reader envisioned by extreme versions of literary formalism. Albeit less systematically than Steen, they sometimes cited the historically evidenced reponses of particular readers or groups of readers, living and dead.

Most strikingly of all, perhaps, a fair number of participants were already striving for some measure of dual vision, with twinned foci of attention on text and communicative world. A fine example is in the connection Watts makes between, on the one hand, readers' varying abilities to respond to the subtle deixis of Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress' and, on the other hand, the varying reality sets predominant in their own mother-tongue cultures. Hence, too, the rich detail in Ziva Ben-Porat's 'two-way' study of the relations between changing representational conventions in Hebrew poetry and the different times and places in which that poetry has been written and read. And hence, again, Claes Schaar's firm line on intertextuality: certainly one has to see what it is in the text that seems to release semantic energy, and one can distinguish various degrees of allusiveness; but the energy of a deeply allusive text is latent rather than free; a reader must bring with him a certain previous experience of reading if he is to release it.

It is the benefits of all such duality of approach that make Balz Engler propose the term 'textualization'. The great danger, as Engler sees it, is that a pragmatics which rests too easily content with a text/context dichotomy will in fact tend to separate the