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Linguistic and Psychological Mechanisms behind Literary Fiction

Described from the perspective of linguistic pragmatics, fictional literary discourse can be characterized as one of the varieties of what I call “presentational discourse”. In presentational discourse, representations of states of affairs (fictional states of affairs, where literary fiction is concerned) are being introduced as an invitation to the reader to experience and reflect upon the act of communication and its representational content, while possible informative or directive purposes behind the act are being relegated to a secondary plane. Presentational discourse exploits a general human tendency in readers: the proclivity to not only register the immediate practical significance of a state of affairs but also, through analogical thinking, perceive the state of affairs as an example of something that may happen repeatedly in various forms. The latter mechanism plays a crucial role for what is traditionally regarded as the “symbolic” dimension of literature.

It is of considerable interest for literary theory to understand the key linguistic and psychological mechanisms that underlie literary discourse and, ipso facto, literary fiction. Viewing literature and literary fiction against a wider linguistic and psychological background can also discourage us from exaggerating the uniqueness of literariness and fictionality. Fictionality, for example, is certainly something distinctive, but it is easy to overemphasize the peculiarity and literary importance of fictionality if you regard fictionality in isolation, not heeding its close relationships with other uses of languages. I will attempt to demonstrate that in a brief discussion of the role of fictionality for literature and of the nature of so-called fictional worlds.