



*Theory and Practice in English Studies 3 (2005):
Proceedings from the Eighth Conference of British, American
and Canadian Studies. Brno: Masarykova univerzita*

English Conversation: Authentic and Fictional

Ludmila Urbanová

Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno

In authentic conversation, discourse strategies are primarily phatic. They serve the purpose of establishing social contact and common ground for a potential exchange of views. Everyday topics support mutuality; they do not require much strain from the interlocutors and result in a rather relaxed, casual way of speaking. Stylization can be found even in these exchanges, although it is not manifested overtly.

On the contrary, fictional dialogues are marked by a distinguishable degree of stylization which can be identified in their discourse structure. They are scripted, bearing witness to the relationship between the participants in the dialogue and depicting the inner world to the protagonists. The topics are primarily selected by the author to show the identity and psychology of the characters involved, and the contextual meaning has to be interpreted within the whole work of art.

1 Stylization as a Socio-Pragmatic Phenomenon

Let me start my treatise on the notion of stylization by the observation made by Mathesius in his article *Stylistika a lingvistická charakteristika* (reprinted in *Jazyk, kultura, slovesnost* 1982). Mathesius claims that “Je pravda, že každý jazyk reprezentuje určitou **stylizaci skutečnosti**, neboť skutečnost není možno vyjádřiti jinak než výběrem a zjednodušením” (1982: 47). [“It is true that every language represents a certain **stylization of the reality**, since the reality can be expressed but by choice and simplification”; translated by L.U.]

It follows that the stylization of reality is present in every manifestation of language as such, i.e. in all the individual functional styles. However, a slightly different view is adopted in *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (ed. J. Pearsall) in which the definition of the entry **stylize** reads “depict or treat in a mannered and non-realistic style” (1998: 1847).

Despite the controversial interpretation of the notion of stylization, I will draw on Mathesius’ concept admitting that in every existing depiction of reality a certain degree of stylization can be found. I assume that the presence of stylization is felt both in authentic and

fictional dialogues; the degree of stylization, however, differs considerably in these two conversation genres.

My hypothesis which I have tentatively formulated is based on the assumption that there is a considerable difference between the stylization present in authentic dialogues on the one hand and fictional ones on the other. In my view, the main difference lies in the manner of stylization, including its degree, due to **different communicative intentions** and **different contexts** reflected in the discourse structure of these two genres of conversation. Corresponding discourse strategies are applied by the speakers to meet the communicative intentions and contextual specifications. Drawing on Mathesisus, I assume that a certain degree of stylization is present in authentic, spontaneous face-to-face conversation as well, since every description and evaluation of reality is bound to be subjective.

1.1 Manner and Degree of Stylization

In my view, authentic dialogues primarily serve the purpose of establishing **social contact and common ground**, i.e. the phatic function, supporting the potential exchange of views. Topics chosen by the interlocutors are governed by the general need for **mutuality**. **Everyday topics** do not require much mental strain and lead to a relaxed, chatty, casual way of expression. The contexts of everyday conversation comprise stereotypical situations which are based on ritualistic speech behaviour.

Contrary to these dialogues, fictional dialogues primarily tend to illustrate **the inner world** of the protagonists, showing their **identity, status and psychology**. The primary aim of the author is to show relationships between the characters influenced by their status, social distance and affective behaviour. It can be stated that stylization in fictional dialogues is more varied and distinct due to the overlap of many factors in their shape and interpretation, which make understanding fictional language a very complex procedure.

2 Variation in Dialogic Structure

It can be assumed that in fictional dialogues the **discourse strategies** utilized by the writer are more diversified. Preference is given to a number of varieties of formal and informal dialogues employed by the author within the discourse structure of a single work of art.

My theoretical point of departure is based on Bakhtin's concept of **heteroglossia** (see Holmquist 1990) and Fowler's concept of **point of view** (1996). According to these concepts, each character, including the narrator of the story, expresses a different point of view with regard to the same reality; thus the dialogic structure lacks uniformity and is inevitably open to different interpretations. A significant departure from ordinary conversation is connected with the fact that the interlocutors in fictional dialogues exchange meanings which are frequently surprisingly **non-stereotypical**, i.e. unique, defamiliarized.

Drawing on my previous research (Urbanová 2003), I can argue that authentic face-to-face conversation is characterized by recurrent dialogic patterns. The style is less varied, more ritualistic and more compatible with the expectations of the interlocutors. The expressed meanings tend to be more frequently stereotypical.

3 Language Sample under Investigation

In my contribution I will only deal with the analysis of fictional dialogues. For the purpose of the present analysis I have chosen Chapter I of the novel *Amsterdam* by Ian Mc Ewan who is the winner of the 1998 Booker Prize. My choice is justified by the marked occurrence of heteroglossia which can be traced in Chapter I of the book.

4 Discourse Analysis

My analysis of fictional dialogues is based on the identification of markedly different types of dialogic structure. The key criterion in my classification is that of **tenor**, i.e. the use of means of expression referring to the relationship between the participants in discourse. Halliday's definition of tenor is related to "the selection of interpersonal options, those in the systems of mood, modality, person, key, intensity, evaluation and comment and the like..." (1993: 144). I have compared the types of dialogic structure on the basis of the corresponding **formality scale**. Simultaneously, I have taken into account also other social dimensions, namely the solidarity-social distance scale, the status scale and the referential-affective function scale (see Holmes 1992: 12-15).

5 Types of Dialogic Structure

According to the level of formality based on the relationship between the participants, eleven different types of dialogic structure can be classified in the sample of fictional discourse. The two criteria for the delimitation of the types are

- a) **discourse functions**
- b) **discourse strategies used by the speakers.**

5.1 Dialogue Type Markers

The following list gives account of the markers which can be identified in the individual dialogues which have been analyzed from the socio-pragmatic point of view:

Type I

intimate, a high degree of informality, equality, affective

Type II

business phone call, informal, superiority, referential

Type III

thanking (expression of appreciation), formal, ritualistic, serious

Type IV

thanking (expression of appreciation), formal, ritualistic, mock

Type V

introducing people, formal, ritualistic, referential

Type VI
introducing people, informal, ritualistic, affective

Type VII
first encounter conversation, establishing common ground, formal, ritualistic

Type VIII
first encounter conversation, establishing common ground, informal, affective

Type IX
stratified first encounter conversation, formality vs. informality, distance vs. intimacy,
conversation vs. public speaking

Type X
inner dialogue, intimate, affective

Type XI
dialogic structure in narrative passages, distant, referential

5.2 Discourse Analysis

A brief evaluation of existing language signals accompanied by paralinguistic features brings evidence of formality/informality, solidarity/distance, referentiality/emotiveness, status and key which are encoded in the dialogues under investigation.

Type I

Type I represents an intimate dialogue between friends based on reciprocity. Signals of intimacy: pronouns, ellipsis, exclamation and the non-verbal response.

- [1] *“She never knew what hit her.”*
“When she did it was too late.”
“Rapid onset.”
“Poor Molly.”
“Mmm.”

Type II

Type II represents a one-way business phone call based on inequality. Signals of superiority: brevity of expression, speech acts of directing, contracted forms and vagueness.

- [2] *“Fine. Rewrite the standfirst and run it on page four. I’ll be there in a couple of hours.”*

Type III

Type III represents a ritualistic act of thanking, formal and serious. Signals of formality: superlatives, appreciation and polite formulae.

- [3] *"It was a wonderful service."*
"It was very kind of you to come."

Type IV

Type IV represents a ritualistic act of thanking, formal and mock. Signals of formality: formal address, polite formulae, expressions of appreciation and reciprocity. The structure is defamiliarized through irony (with regard to the preceding context).

- [4] *"Mr. Linley has kindly accepted an invitation to dinner." This may have been an agreed code, for the young man stepped across promptly to usher Clive away while Garmony turned his back on him to say to the journalists, "A great man, Clive Linley. To air differences and remain friends, the essence of civilised existence, don't you think?"*

Type V

Type V represents a ritualistic act of introducing people, serious. Signals of formality: intensification of the excuse, address, body language (shaking hands).

- [5] *"And do excuse me," he added, "these are the Finch sisters, Vera and Mini, who knew Molly from her Boston days. Clive Linley." They shook hands.*

Type VI

Type VI represents a semi-formal ritualistic act of introducing people, serious. Signals of semi-formality: address and a direct inquiry, appreciation.

- [6] *"And this," George said, "also from the States, is Hart Pullman."*
"Hart Pullman. At last. Do you remember I set your Rage poems for jazz orchestra?"

Type VII

Type VII represents a first encounter conversation seeking common ground, formal, showing respect. Signals of formality: polite formulae, address and expression of appreciation.

- [7] *"You're the composer?" Vera or Mini asked.*
"That's right."
"It's a great honor, Mr. Linley. My eleven-year-old granddaughter studied your sonatina for her final exam in violin and loved it."
"That's very nice to know."

Type VIII

Type VIII represents a first encounter conversation seeking common ground, informal, offensive and affective. Signals of informality: vagueness, vulgar language, a direct speech act of inquiry (who?), an informal exclamation expressing excitement (Oh, boy).

- [8] *"These days I don't remember a thing, not a fucking thing," he said pleasantly in a high-pitched, chirpy voice. "But if you said you did it, you did it."*

*“You remember Molly, though,” Clive said.
“Who?”
“Oh, sure,” he said in his Bugs Bunny voice. “Molly and me go way back to ‘65
in the East Village. I remember Molly. Oh boy!”*

Type IX

Type IX represents a stratified conversation showing abrupt changes in the level of formality and differences in key. Three stages in the discourse structure of the dialogue can be distinguished.

Stage I is very formal, showing mutual respect. Signals of formality: the polite formula *How do you do*, expression of mutual appreciation, acknowledgement.

- [9] *“I’ve been wanting to meet you for years.”
“How do you do.”
“My wife knows a few of your piano pieces by heart.”
“She must be good.”*

Stage II is semi-formal, showing inequality in power relations. Signals of semi-formality: the change from conversational style to public-speaking style, the politician showing superiority and dominance, the composer showing lack of respect which is intensified to hostility.

- [10] *“There was another thing. I wanted to congratulate you on your commission. The Millennial symphony. D’you know, that decision went right up to cabinet level?”
“So I heard. And you voted for me.”*
- [11] *“I was wondering,” Clive said to Molly’s ex-lover, “whether you’re still in favor of hanging.”
“I think most people are aware of my position on that. Meanwhile, I’m happy to accept the view of Parliament and the collective responsibility of the cabinet.”
“I see you once said in a speech that Nelson Mandela deserved to be hanged.”
“I don’t think you can reasonably nail people to things they said as hot-headed undergraduates.” “Almost thirty years ago. I bet you said or thought pretty shocking things yourself.”*

Stage III represents an offensive way of speaking related to power relations. Signals of informality: rude vocabulary, phrasal verbs, strong disagreement and vagueness.

- [12] *“The very last time I saw Molly she told me you were impotent and always had been.”
“Complete nonsense. She never said that.”
“Of course you’re bound to deny it. Thing is, we could discuss it out loud in front of the gentlemen over there, or you could get off my case and make a pleasant farewell. That is to say, fuck off.”*

Type X

Type X represents the inner dialogue of the protagonist reflecting affective meanings of uncertainty, anxiety and helplessness. Signals of informality: directives, phrasal verb, other means of expression being formal and sophisticated (monitor, decline, dignity).

- [13] *Stay away then, monitor your own decline; then, when it was no longer possible to work, or to live with dignity, finish it yourself.*

Type XI

Type XI represents reflections of the dialogic structure in the narrative passages. The dialogic element present is the repetition of the dialogic exclamation *Poor Molly* providing the framework for the narration of the story of Molly in Chapter I: the beginning of the narration includes the exclamation *Poor Molly* and the end of the narration (the end of Chapter I) finishes the train of thought of the protagonist Clive Linley.

- [14] **Poor Molly.** *It began with a tingling in her arm as she raised it outside the Dorchester Grill to stop a cab - a sensation that never went away.*
- [15] *This thought too was comfort, so that long before the chemicals had reached his brain, he had drawn his knees toward his chest and was released. Hardknott, Ill Bell, Cold Pike, Poor Crag, Poor Molly...*

7 Conclusions

It has been verified in the fictional discourse under investigation that the dialogue represents distinct means of expressing relationships between characters, including the inner dialogue. At the same time, the dialogue reveals the psychology of characters and their emotions. It has been confirmed that the book under analysis contains a variety of dialogue types. Chapter I covering 25 pages of text includes eleven different types of dialogic structure.

Another important finding is connected with the **stratification of the levels of formality** occurring in the dialogues. The dialogues differ considerably in the expression of status and social distance. In the majority of cases the level of formality, the expression of social distance and status are well-balanced within the dialogue type. Attitudes expressed by the speakers remain constant (positive or negative). They are supported by mutual knowledge and common ground, or showing lack of either.

On the other hand, Type IX represents a **stratified type of dialogic structure** displaying an unbalanced repertoire of very different means of expression used by the same speaker. The level of **formality** (formal – informal), **the degree of politeness** (polite – rude), **the mode of expression** (private – public – private) and **the key** (serious vs. mock) are changing within the same setting on the same occasion (meeting people in front of the crematorium after the funeral). The chart below shows the shifts in the dialogic structure of Type IX:

Chart 1

formality > superiority > negative intimacy > formality

The dialogue structure contains several distinct layers of formality and intimacy. A gradual shift can be observed from a very polite formal level to the level of unpleasant patronizing showing **superiority** (characteristic of public-speaking), later even to a **negatively intimate level** showing contempt, finally changing again into a very **polite formal level** representing a mocking strategy. These surprising changes are primarily the result of the presence or absence

of other participants in discourse (journalists), and also markers of the stages of discourse development from the first encounter strategy to a common ground strategy.

References

- Holquist, M. (1990) *Dialogism. Bakhtin and his World*, London: Routledge.
- Ferenčík, M. (2003) 'Stylistics' in Štekauer, P. and Kavka, S. (eds) *Rudiments of Language II*, Acta Facultatis Philosophicae Universitatis Prešovensis, Prešov, 237-296.
- Fowler, R. (1996) *Linguistic Criticism*, 2nd edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1993) *Language as Social Semiotic*, London: Edward Arnold.
- Holmes, J. (1992) *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, London: Longman.
- Lodge, D. (1992) *The Art of Fiction*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Lodge, D. (2001) *Language of Fiction*, London: Routledge.
- Mathesius, V. (1982) 'Stylistika a lingvistická charakteristika' in *Jazyk, kultura, slovesnost*, Praha: Odeon, 45-49.
- Pearsall, J., ed. (1998) *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Urbanová, L. (2003) *On Expressing Meaning in English Conversation*, Brno: Masarykova univerzita.

Sources

- Mc Ewan, Ian (1999) *Amsterdam*, New York. Chapter I, 3-28.