

A New Digital Method for a New Literary Problem: A Proposed Methodology for Briding the "Generalist" - "Specialist" Divide in the Study of World Literature

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This paper is situated within the debate between “specialist” and “generalist” methods of analysis in the study of world literature. It is argued that a systemic linguistic discourse analysis of appropriately encoded text passages can provide a methodology which can be utilised to interrogate the national and international demarcations of comparative literary analysis. A case study consisting of a textual analysis of the dialogical relationship between patient and therapist in a “factional”, i.e. works of fiction, which draw upon historical fact. Irish and English novel is provided. The benefits of the results yielded to current understandings of national literature and definitions of world literature are discussed.

In 1827, the German poet, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, declared to his young disciple Johann Peter Eckermann that “National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach” (Eckermann, cited

in [Damrosch, 2003b, p. 1]). History informs us however that Goethe was premature in his heralding of a new age of “postnational” literature, as up until recently all literatures tended to have been studied along national lines [Dimock, 2006, pp. 2-5]. Yet in more recent decades, nations and, by extension, “national” literatures have become increasingly under threat in their sovereignty over all elements of human life due to the homogenising and heterogenising effects of globalisation. Globalisation is defined by Malcolm Waters as being “a social process in which the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding” [Waters, 1995, p. 3]. It is not surprising therefore, that in an age where national boundaries, both physical and mental, are become increasingly insignificant and blurred, we find a renewed interest in Goethe’s concept of *Weltliteratur*.

As with all things new, the emerging discipline of world literature has evoked fear and reservations among literary scholars. According to David Damrosch, the possibility of recognizing the ongoing, vital presence of the national within the life of world literature poses enormous problems for the study of world literature [Damrosch, 2003a, p. 514]. Thus the field tends to be divided into “specialists”, those who are concerned with national literatures, and “generalists”, those who are interested in studying global patterns. But instead of this either/or method, Damrosch maintains that what is needed is a method that can mediate between broad and often reductive overviews and intensive, but often atomistic close readings [p. 519]. As Franco Moretti argues, “we must find a way to combine the individual who reads a single work with great collective efforts and vision” [Sutherland, 2006, Monday 9 January, 2006]. This paper argues that a combination of Systemic Functional Linguistics and Digital Humanities offers one way whereby this may be achieved.

The complexities involved in the interpreting of “literary language” for electronic media have perhaps posited the greatest deterrent for literary scholars in embracing digital humanities to date. The pioneering work of scholars such as Willard McCarty and Jerome McGann (among

others) unfortunately remain the exception among their peers in the field of literary studies. The majority within the discipline retain the fear that computer based analysis of texts can only reveal “broad sweeping patterns” within literary works. Interestingly, this fear echoes the reservations that are held about the theoretical methods deployed by “generalists” in the study of world literature. Contrary to both these fears, this paper will argue that computer-based literary research can be utilized to provide both a means of analysis for the specificities of national literatures, while also serving as a tool for carrying out comparative textual analysis at an international scale. We wish to present to the following methodology to the community.

1. Case Study: The Patient-Therapist Relationship in Literature

This project will consist of an analysis of a passage of dialogue between patient and therapist in Sebastian Barry’s *The Secret Scripture* (2008) and Pat Barker’s *Regeneration* (1995). For the purpose of this study, we have chosen a novel by an Irish writer and an English writer respectively. Given that this methodology is in its infancy, it is presumed best to begin with two texts written in the same language and which originate from countries of similar cultural systems. *The Secret Scripture* is set in present day Ireland but the narrative is made up of a double narrative; the personal recollections of Roseanne Clear, who was incarcerated in a mental institution during the mid twentieth century, and the account by the psychiatrist, Dr. Greene, of his own investigation into Roseanne’s admittance into the hospital. *Regeneration* is based on the real-life experiences of British army officers being treated for shell shock during World War I at Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh. Its narrative relays the treatment of soldiers suffering mental break down. It is shaped predominately around the discussions which the psychiatrist, Dr. Rivers, has with a number of patients within the asylum in which he works. Both novels are centered around events which have caused psychological distress to the individual characters, but which have also caused what is known as ‘cultural trauma’¹ to the nations in which they are set.

2. Methodology

Our method of analysis is based on Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) which is a model of grammar that was developed by Michael Halliday in the 1960s [Halliday, 1976, Halliday, 2004]. It is part of a broad social semiotic approach to language called systemic linguistics. The term *systemic* refers to the view of language as “a network of systems, or interrelated sets of options for making meaning”. The term *functional* indicates that the approach is concerned with meaning, as opposed to formal grammar, which focuses on word classes such as nouns and verbs, typically without reference beyond the individual clause. Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a theory of language centred around the notion of language function. SFL places the function of language as central (what language does, and how it does it), in preference to more structural approaches, which place the elements of language and their combinations as central. Specifically, it begins with a social context, and looks at how language both acts upon, and is constrained by, this social context. In the model, and methodology, particular aspects of a given social context (such as the topics discussed, the language users and the medium of communication) define the meanings likely to be expressed and the language likely to be used to express those meanings. Since language is viewed as semiotic potential, the description of language is a description of choice. Systemic linguists examine the choices language users can make in a given setting to realise a particular linguistic product (the available choices depend on aspects of the context in which the language is being used). By examining the different choices for the discourse between characters in similar social contexts in different texts, we believe that it may be possible to identify, or describe, the features associated with national literatures that address the problem described here.

Our approach is essentially a discourse analysis rather than textual analysis, although it relies on encoded text for comparative analysis. Specifically, we draw on existing SFL models of sociolinguistic and cognitive approaches to doctor-patient discourse [Todd and Fisher, 1993, Togher, 2001]. These models (i) analyse the patterns of talk that are produced by the

situational demands of the particular setting, (ii) provide a detailed examination of the interplay of language use in this organisational context of health care delivery, and (iii) examine the production of doctor-patient communication, and (iv) examine the relationship between social structure and social interaction, and explore the relationship between power and resistance. The discourse analyses will utilise custom developed software that analyses encoded passages of text from the novels. A number of encoding schemes exist and provide mechanisms for encoding linguistic data, for example, the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) [Sperberg-McQueen and Burnard, 1994] or the more recent XCES, based on the Corpus Encoding Standard (CES) which is a part of the EAGLES Guidelines developed by the Expert Advisory Group on Language Engineering Standards (EAGLES). EAGLES provides a set of encoding standards for corpus-based work in natural language processing applications [Ide et al., 2000].

3. Discussion

Through the investigation into past experiences in an attempt to divulge facts about the present condition, the patient-therapist relationship has enormous significance in “factional” novels, given their link to cultural memory and cultural trauma. For example, the revelation of the occurrence of nominalisation in the dialogue between patient and therapist provides textual evidence as to whether the patient successfully ‘moves on’ from the traumatic past experience. Nominalisation is an example of *grammatical metaphor*; the term given when one grammatical class is substituted for another, for example, replacing *he departed* with *his departure*. The lexical items are the same, but their place in the grammar has changed. In this example, the meaning expressed by an individual differs in that one form identifies a transient event while the other is more permanent. Attention is also paid to the gender of the characters. The case-study will provide (i) an example of a recurring literary structure of focused dialogue, (ii) one which has a general referent in therapeutic terms: literature of trauma etc., and (iii) but also a dialogue which gathers particular meaning from its specific national and cultural context of conflict (in the case of our chosen novels, an emerging

independent Ireland and immediate post World War I Britain).

We demonstrate how the findings of our study can be utilized to provide a specialist analysis of the texts within their respective national literatures of Ireland and Britain by applying them to answer a specific literary question about the texts in their national contexts. Having done so, we then illustrate that our findings also elucidate what can be achieved by generalist studies in the context of world literature by comparing the results to provide a commentary on variations in the artistic treatment of cultural trauma.

4. Conclusion

Our case study tests a methodology, which is concerned with analyzing a ‘common-denominator’ (the patient-therapist relationship) between texts. This opens up the two novels under examination to a useful comparative reading as works of world literature, while also yielding useful results to study of the texts within their respective national literatures. In so doing it (i) introduces a new methodology to the academic community and (ii) demonstrates the application of the results produced by said methodology to the answering of a specific literary question. The ultimate aim of the model is to provide a digital linguistic tool that supports individual and collaborative projects in the study of world literature, thus assuaging the needs of both ‘specialists’ and ‘generalists’. In so doing, it offers a solution to one of the problems present in the study of world literature while simultaneously advancing the use of digital humanities in literary studies.

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Notes

1. Neil J. Smelser defines cultural trauma as being a memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation which is a) laden with negative effect, b) represented as indelible, and c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions (Smelser cited in [Alexander et al., 2004, p. 44])