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**IN WHAT SOCIETY DO FICTIONAL CHARACTERS SPEAK?
IDENTIFYING AND DISCUSSING THEORETICAL CHALLENGES IN
SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSES OF LITERATURE**

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Abstract: This article examines the use of literary fiction as a source of data for analysing linguistic patterns in social contexts. By highlighting two interconnected methodological challenges in sociolinguistic studies of literary fiction, this study aims to foster interdisciplinary dialogue on study designs and methods. Building on previous unresolved discussions, it is argued that, firstly, studies that are limited to identifying a fictional text’s mimetic function and drawing real-world-related conclusions from that text risk circular reasoning, thereby contributing little new knowledge. Secondly, the structural unreliability and ambiguity of fictional dialogue often make it problematic to incorporate into sociolinguistic analyses unless its specific conditions are considered. Using scholarly articles as examples, the discussion addresses these challenges to better integrate literary studies and sociolinguistics.

Keywords: interdisciplinary, novel, theory, sociolinguistics, literariness.

Introduction

Sociolinguistic research often employs fictional narratives, including novels, short stories, and children’s books, as illustrative examples of linguistic practices that reflect particular societal nuances. Elements such as gendered language, slang expressions, and code-switching are examined within literary texts to gain insights

into the dynamics of specific local communities. This article investigates this approach, and, after outlining two methodological challenges, initiates a discussion on potential developments in this interdisciplinary field towards more nuanced methodologies.

The question of whether fictional characters can be understood to represent real-world individuals, and if so, in what way, is a complex one. Because fictional worlds are imagined, attributing a narrative to a particular cultural or geographical setting does not necessarily imply that it accurately reflects the local linguistic conventions of the real-world area it references. Just as seemingly autobiographical novels cannot be used as historical evidence of the author's actual life – a phenomenon known as the biographical fallacy – it is problematic to assume that fictional characters faithfully replicate the linguistic patterns of the community they are depicted as belonging to. Similarly, it is difficult to determine to what extent a work of fiction should be expected to reflect the socio-historical background of its author. As Marie-Laure Ryan argues, in natural discourse, we typically aim to reconstruct the depicted world to resemble the real world as closely as possible, adhering to the principle of minimal departure (Ryan 403). However, in fiction, the pronoun “I” is not bound by this principle; it can easily be attributed to subjectivities other than the actual speaker. It is worth noting that the speaker may still be presumed to be the referent of the pronoun, as in a purely testimonial or documentary passage of a novel that the author reads aloud to an audience, presenting it as entirely autobiographical. It is also common for the speaker to be partially or ambiguously associated with the author, as seen in autofictional texts. Nevertheless, the principle of minimal departure does not apply to fiction in the same way it does to natural discourse.

That said, literary narratives can, at times, provide insights into the historical context, cultural norms, and linguistic practices of the period in which they were written – or the period they portray. The distinctive features of fiction create opportunities to study linguistic patterns that might otherwise be inaccessible. Given the premise that, under certain conditions, a literary character can serve as a type of sociolinguistic informant, it is vital to explore and debate the most effective research methods in this area.

The article is structured as follows: it begins by reviewing relevant theories on what differentiates fictional literature from other forms of language, thereby

establishing a framework for critically examining the use of fictional narratives as data for analysing and understanding the linguistic practices of real-world communities. This is followed by an introduction to two interrelated challenges – circular causality and structural ambiguity – that arise in sociolinguistic applications of literature, illustrated through examples from published studies. It is important to stress that the inclusion of these studies is not primarily intended to criticise the research itself but to highlight structural issues inherent in this type of analysis. The article’s primary focus is on principles and methods, aiming to stimulate a largely theoretical discussion about the interdisciplinary nature of the subject. As Bronwen Thomas has pointed out, “there has been insufficient cross-fertilisation of these issues and debates” (Thomas 2). My aim is to encourage scholars from various fields, including sociolinguistics, stylistics, and narratology, to work collaboratively in developing more refined methodologies for exploring the interface between natural and literary speech.

Literature’s distinctiveness

Literature maintains a close relationship with history, both locally, in terms of the author’s connection to their society, and globally, through the structural ties of fictional narratives to the historical world. Many critics position literary works at the nexus of their historical moment, intricately linked to – or even governed by – the prevailing culture and social reality. Within this, in a framework often influenced by Marxist-oriented criticism, writers and readers, as Hans Robert Jauss observes, are shaped by the aesthetic, political, and cultural trends of their time, alongside literary and historical canons (Jauss 23).

It must, however, be noted that literature’s relationship to reality differs significantly from many other forms of language. Dorrit Cohn is among the theorists who argue that fictional narratives are unique in their ability to create self-contained universes governed by their own formal patterns, unlike any other form of discourse. This means that literary authors, in a distinctive way, craft universes that are self-reflective. The value of a literary text, unlike that of a documentary or instruction manual, does not rely on its representativeness with respect to historical localities. While certain literary works – for instance, novels from the realist and naturalist movements of the late 19th century – appear to meticulously mirror specific local strata of the real world, writers of a more modernist persuasion adopt a far less

constrained approach. They manipulate, personalise, or even randomise the material at their disposal to create literature with intricate and often ambiguous connections to historical realities.

As Viktor Shklovsky has emphasised, many literary writers aim to provoke a more direct perception of the world's objects, seeking to restore the sensation of life that is dulled by processes of socialisation. When objects are presented in unfamiliar ways, readers may set aside socially constructed ideas and perceive the object as it truly is: the stone regains its stoniness. Since this process of perception is an aesthetic goal in itself, the literary writer consciously complicates forms, thereby lengthening the process of perception. From this perspective, the writer's reshaping of historical reality is not intended to distance the fictional universe from reality but to engage with it in more meaningful and concrete ways. Yet Shklovsky's model of literature's estrangement draws a clear line between literary and social discourse: while the latter is relatively communicative, fast, and dependent on clichés and preconceptions, the former is slower and seeks to stimulate new perceptions of the world – perceptions that social interactions may suppress.

A related concept is *foregrounding*, which refers to a technique used by writers to artistically highlight specific elements or patterns of language by altering linguistic conventions (Peer and Hakemulder). Hugo Bowles stresses the importance of distinguishing the “deviant cases” of natural speech from the intentional, writer-constructed deviations found in literature (Bowles 162). The latter are best understood as deliberately crafted stylistic elements designed to produce specific effects on the reader. Their purpose lies in the writer's creative endeavour, rather than in any presumed inability of the speaker to conform to social linguistic conventions.

Another feature that sets literature apart from other forms of language is its strong reliance on the reader's freedom to imagine and fill in the gaps. Unlike fact-oriented genres, the literary text is highly elliptical: writers depend on the reader to construct significant portions of the story and characters using their own imagination and life experience.

At the same time, the author's influence on the text and its reception is undeniable. Literature thus functions as an inventive game in which the author proposes lines of thought and emotional landscapes that the reader may either expand upon or disregard, depending on individual and circumstantial factors. As

Paul Ricoeur (Ricoeur 153) and Michael Riffaterre (Riffaterre 10) have suggested, the literary text is akin to a musical score, open to numerous interpretations. This is why a well-crafted text can be revisited multiple times by the same reader, with each encounter producing a unique experience.

Literary works are therefore distinctive in that they “do not have clear messages and are not meant to arouse only certain very particular effects” (Hilgers 4). Instead, they are designed to inspire readers to freely engage with different temperaments that emerge through the uniquely stylised evocation of imagined worlds. As a result, literary texts’ indirect ways of relating to the world necessitate special considerations in their analysis and interpretation. While society can undoubtedly be examined through the lens of literature, the approach required differs from that applied to other types of material.

Sociolinguistics and literature

Sociolinguistics examines the social dimensions of language, focusing, for instance, on the role language plays in maintaining social roles within a community. The discipline seeks to identify the linguistic features employed in specific situations, analysing the social relationships among participants and the key elements of the context. Additionally, sociolinguists aim to understand the factors influencing the choice of sounds, grammatical structures, and vocabulary items, considering variables such as age, gender, education, occupation, and peer-group affiliation.

Today, most sociolinguists regard language and society as mutually constitutive, with each exerting inseparable and complex influences on the other. Language carries social, cultural, and personal significance, and through the use of linguistic markers, speakers symbolically define both themselves and the society they inhabit. In essence, language is not merely a tool for transmitting messages; it is an active force that shapes our actions and interactions as social beings in the world. Sociolinguistic research seeks to explore both social and linguistic diversity, enhancing our understanding of how language enables speakers to inhabit and negotiate their many personal, cultural, and social identities (see, e.g., Agha; Chambers; Mallinson).

For literary sociolinguists, sociolinguistic concepts such as speech community and social network are particularly useful in the analysis of literary texts (Fennell and Bennett 371). It is important to distinguish, on the one hand, the use of linguistic

tools to better understand the compositional, semantic, and ideological offerings made to readers by specific literary texts, and, on the other hand, the use of literary texts to understand a distinct society within the historical world. As Nigel Fabb has emphasised, the latter approach can be problematic unless methods are adapted to address the specific challenges posed by literature.

Research shows that advertising, television programmes, and films manipulate, soften, or exaggerate linguistic features to achieve effects such as class-specific “authentic” language, trustworthiness, or recognition by target audiences (see Bell; Birkner and Gilles; Marriott). This *reflection fallacy* is also relevant to literary discourse, as “linguistic constructions of localness [do not always] correspond to an authentic counterpart” (Androutsopoulos 748–749). Just as advertisers shape speech for commercial purposes, writers craft their characters’ dialogue to reflect the aesthetic ideas and narrative concepts underpinning the literary work being created. Writers are by no means obligated to replicate the linguistic patterns of the locality they depict. As Michael Toolan observes, conversations involving literary characters are often “tidied up,” with “literary conventions at work governing the fictional representations of talk, so that the rendered text is quite other than a faithful transcription of a natural conversation” (Toolan 195).

For comparison, it is worth noting that literary scholars such as Dominic Cheetham take an even clearer and more categorical stance on the distinctiveness of literary discourse in relation to conversation analysis. Cheetham identifies five key differences between literary conversation and natural conversation, stating firstly that “characters in literature do not have free will (Cheetham 4–5). They are totally controlled by the author. Whilst characters in a text may appear to be getting to know each other, or arguing about the price of eggs, what is really happening is that the author is showing us them getting to know each other or arguing about the price of eggs. They are conversing not for their own reasons, but for the author’s. It is not talk by and for each other, but talk controlled from outside, and for an audience, the readers.” Cheetham further explains that, secondly, “conversation in literature is not a joint venture; it is a solo venture,” and, thirdly, “because conversation in literature is a solo venture, the question of background knowledge becomes moot. There is no private knowledge for any of the characters. Questions and answers become textual tools rather than interactional tools.”

Fourth, although experienced in real time, literary conversation is not produced in real time. Rather, it is “edited and revised several times [and] probably carefully planned in advance.” Finally, literary dialogue “is not ephemeral; it is long-lived. It is written, and therefore as permanent as the materials it is written on or with.”

One might argue that conversation in literature still reflects real societies, as it is created by an individual living within a specific cultural context. Writers do not invent dialogue out of thin air but instead draw from personal experience. However, it is important to recognise that writers have the freedom to deviate from the linguistic patterns of their own cultural backgrounds. They may choose to incorporate dialects, sociolects, and languages different from those they use in their everyday lives.

Many linguists also acknowledge the distinct nature of literature and adjust their approaches accordingly. Hugo Bowles, for example, has highlighted that turn-taking in dramatic works differs from turn-taking in natural conversation (Bowles 164). Bowles notes that “for publishing reasons playwrights have almost no alternative other than to write their dialogues as ‘one turn after another’. This creates an impression of smoothness in turn-taking which is not generally found in ordinary conversation, making the quality of turn-taking difficult to judge.” In discussing Vimala Herman’s analysis of turn changes in *Look Back in Anger*, Bowles questions her interpretation of the characters’ prompt and smooth turn-taking. He adds, “given a play-text’s inevitable orderliness it seems difficult to interpret most turn changing behaviour in playscripts as anything other than ‘prompt’ and ‘smooth’” (Bowles 164).

Bowles convincingly argues that the incongruities between natural and literary dialogue highlight the need for caution when applying Conversation Analysis (CA) to literary texts. He identifies two key issues. First, CA becomes ambiguous and less effective when the conversational data is not natural. Second, he observes that “the CA-based descriptions that are produced by treating a text as if it was real fail to recognise and account for the artificiality of the text, which according to stylisticians is better served by a more cognitive pragmatic approach.” I agree with Bowles that these are “serious objections which require methodological clarification of the status of the script if the application of CA to scripts is to be theoretically justifiable” (Bowles 164).

More genre-aware studies demonstrate that examining code-switching in literary texts can offer valuable insights that complement those derived from natural speech samples. As Daniel Weston and Penelope Gardner-Chloros have noted, drama and prose possess the unique ability to explore sociolinguistic dynamics that are improbable or rarely observed in real life. In this context, the absence of realism – which might deter sociolinguists – can actually present distinctive and valuable opportunities for analysis and reflection. Such an approach can enhance our understanding of patterns of multilingual choice, placing them within meaningful and interpretable contexts. In their study of code-switching in literary works, Weston and Gardner-Chloros assert that artistic deviations from verisimilitude can reveal perceptions of different linguistic varieties. When the distinctiveness of literature is taken into account, sociolinguistic analyses of literary representations have the potential to deepen our understanding of the world. However, the particularities of literature are not always recognised, leading to inadequate methodologies and questionable or trivial conclusions. I will provide examples of these issues below, with the aim of fostering interdisciplinary discussion on how methods can be improved.

Problem 1: Circular causality

The first challenge addressed in this article is the risk of circular reasoning. If literary discourse is analysed on the assumption that it reflects real-world language, and conclusions are subsequently drawn based on the idea that the same connection applies when translating literature back to reality, the reasoning risks becoming circular, offering little or no new knowledge. For such a study to be meaningful, it is essential to consider the ability of literary writers to develop unique linguistic structures and details.

In their article “Women about Women: Genderlect Manifestations through Positive and Negative Self-Stereotypes in Contemporary Fiction,” Oksana Bohovyk, Andrii Bezrukov, and Victor Yashkina examine patterns of self-stereotyping in several contemporary anglophone novels. The authors studied include highly renowned figures such as Salman Rushdie and Zadie Smith. To highlight the multicultural nature of genderlect self-stereotypes, writers of diverse ethnic backgrounds are represented. The scholars argue that “it is significant that writers use stereotypes to create a well-thought-out, consistent image of the world, thereby

helping the readers navigate the ‘real’ world of fictional events.” They maintain that the use of stereotypes enables fiction writers to craft realistic dialogue. Their aim is to “determine and specify the ways and means of representing genderlect self-stereotypes as exemplified in contemporary fictional discourse and classify them to explicate the strategies of women’s verbal behaviour” (Bohovyk et al. 21). The researchers claim that literature mirrors the prevailing views, concepts, and ideas within society, accentuating the axiological aspects of thought. They conclude that “the analysis of the selected novels suggests that *women today are oppressed by the community* regardless of their social or professional status and are often disapproved of by society [my emphasis]” (Bohovyk et al. 27).

The choice to use literary texts as data does not appear to stem from an aim to identify and analyse how a specific writer or narrative device expresses a particular phenomenon, such as self-stereotyping. Nor are the texts employed to uncover patterns or aspects of self-stereotyping that might not be visible in other forms of discourse. Instead, the scholars cited rely on fictional data to confirm hypotheses about real-world social phenomena.

When literary texts are scrutinised on the presumption that they reflect linguistic patterns from the real world, as the studied article suggests, it is hardly surprising to find society’s patterns represented within them. Such an approach risks circularity in its reasoning. However, if literary texts are examined on their own terms, the identification and analysis of recognisable linguistic patterns from the real world can enhance our understanding of those patterns—or at least provoke fruitful discussions about their structure. Here, a productive form of hermeneutic circularity (Gadamer 271) could enhance our comprehension of both the nuances of literary language and the historical context, provided we transition thoughtfully between the two. This would allow each source of information to illuminate the other while acknowledging the conceptual and modal asymmetries that distinguish them. In other words, literature does not enhance our understanding of societies merely because it may imitate the real world in some instances; it does so by transforming reality in creative and innovative ways.

It is worth noting that the studied article makes a commendable effort to identify and categorise examples of genderlect, potentially improving our understanding of how such linguistic patterns both shape and are shaped by society. Nevertheless, as the specificity of literature is not adequately considered, it remains

unclear why literary texts are used in preference to real-world language samples or modelled examples. While research designed in this manner can yield new knowledge by advancing intriguing hypotheses about genderlect as a linguistic form, using literary texts as representations of reality risks leading to circular conclusions about actual practices in the real world.

To provide another example of the aforementioned issue, in “Slang Words in *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* (Novel): Type and Interpretation,” a group of scholars examine the use of substandard jargon in a novel by the American author Jesse Andrews (Nasution et al.). The researchers aim to contribute knowledge about how language is socially structured and influenced by factors such as age and class. They draw on general sociolinguistic theory (e.g., Halliday) and theories of slang (Holmes). The authors assert that:

[T]he data found in the novel shows that the speaker who is superior speaks slang language to the subordinate. This is because the speaker in higher status *intends* to create a close relationship or lessen social distance to the addressee. Since the addressee is a teenager, the speaker uses the slang language in order to be acceptable. This sign *fits to Holmes’s explanation (2013)*. Holmes claims that standard speech form portrays social distance. It means an informal language (slang) is used to make the social distance among the speaker disappeared [my emphasis] (Nasution et al. 219).

As demonstrated in this excerpt, intention is attributed to the character’s mind rather than to the author’s craft in “maintaining the illusion of genuine conversation” (Cheetham 10). This creates the impression that the character is treated as if they were a real person in the same situation. The approach is further reinforced by the analysis of the character’s utterances through sociolinguistic theories that are oriented towards real-world contexts. While this method may be appropriate for evaluating the credibility or realism of a literary text’s dialogue—as Alice Spitz does in her analysis of Ian McEwan’s *On Chesil Beach*—it is less suitable for investigating how people interact linguistically in real-world contexts. This perspective seemingly overlooks the fact that the words are crafted by the author, not spoken autonomously by the characters.

This example also illustrates the challenge of circular consequentiality. The researchers select the novel, with its characters using slang, as an example of a

linguistic pattern they recognise from real-world contexts. They then apply sociolinguistic theory to interpret the characters' utterances and, from this analysis, draw conclusions about the power structures within real-world societies.

This is not to dismiss the general potential for invented characters to offer insights into real-world language dynamics. However, the cited study misses a crucial step: it assumes, rather than demonstrates, that the dialogue of literary characters can be used to validate established theories of human interactions. Merely because character A speaks words B does not inherently prove sociolinguistic pattern C, as posited by sociolinguist D. Instead, the process operates in reverse: researchers are already aware of pattern C through their familiarity with the theoretical work of D. Consequently, they interpret the utterances of character A and the actions of character B through the lens of theory C. It is plausible that the *creator* of A and B may also have engaged with theory C and drawn inspiration from it. While character B might serve as *an illustrative example* of pattern C, this does not independently confirm the validity of C in real-world contexts, nor does the existence of C validate the social relevance of B. As such, the consequentiality proposed in this line of reasoning is questionable due to its circular nature and the absence of evidence establishing B's representativeness.

If the analysis is interpreted generously, one might infer that the researchers are aware of this arbitrariness and see their contribution as highlighting an illustrative example of slang use that could initiate further research. In that case, it would be helpful for the researchers to explicitly acknowledge their view of the literary scene as an illustrative rather than definitive example of previously identified patterns. As mentioned earlier, while literary examples can, under certain circumstances, enhance our understanding of linguistic structures, they cannot independently confirm the historical position or real-world relevance of these structures.

Problem 2: Structural unreliability and ambiguity

As mentioned above, the speaker's position in literary narratives is complex. Determining responsibility for utterances and their modalities can therefore be challenging. Moreover, the value of a literary work often lies in its openness to interpretation and the reader's ability to engage with the narrator's or main character's perspective in multiple ways. Narrators and characters evolve throughout

the story, drawing readers into a quest to “understand their background,” personality, and life choices. Here, I place “understand their background” in quotation marks for two reasons. Firstly, rather than *understanding* a clear causality—such as a connection between childhood and adulthood, although this is what readers feel they are doing—readers are actually *inventing*, filling in the gaps intentionally left by the author for the reader’s imagination to complete. Secondly, the possessive pronoun in “understanding their background,” referring to the story’s characters, obscures the fact that expanding the fictional world into the past does not necessarily rely solely on the explicit contours of the characters. Instead, the complex process of imagining the story’s past may draw upon knowledge of the author’s life and previous works, as well as the reader’s own life experiences. Thus, depending on the reader’s imaginative efforts, a multitude of possibly contradictory backstories may be accurately “understood,” i.e., invented.

Being creative in envisioning the story’s past and future events becomes particularly significant when the narrator is constructed as unreliable. In such cases, the speaker is not to be trusted, as the narrative relies on either deliberately withheld information or the provision of misleading information. Even narrators deemed “reliable” are so only within the realm of the fictional world; their information cannot unreservedly be taken as valid in a historical context. In Ryan’s terms, the principle of minimal departure does not apply (Ryan 403). The narrator—whether reliable or unreliable—thus fundamentally differs from a speaker intending to convey historical truths. The contract offered by the writer invites a special kind of engagement, enabling a unique experience in which the reader must use their imagination to make sense of the often-elliptical discourse presented.

This indicates that the information and values expressed within literary works are inherently complex to evaluate from a sociohistorical perspective. They are shaped by the narrator’s or character’s position within the narrative structure, while also indirectly stemming from and influencing the writer’s ethos (see Baroni; Korthals Altes). Each utterance is both a reflection of the creative concept behind the specific work and a potential trigger for varied forms of reader engagement.

The disparity in evaluations and understandings of literary texts—particularly where speakers are fundamentally unreliable—implies that literature demands specific interpretative models that reconcile the aims of sociolinguistic research with the unique characteristics of literary discourse. To illustrate the need for

interdisciplinary considerations and the development of more nuanced methodologies, an article authored by Atik Ulinuha and Tantry Ajeng Parnawati will be briefly discussed.

The article examines intercultural communication as portrayed in the novel and film *Memoirs of a Geisha*, originally written by Arthur Golden. The authors analyse the intercultural communication displayed by fictional characters in terms of language change and linguistic etiquette. Ulinuha and Parnawati also identify instances of language alternation in the characters' speech, explaining them through sociolinguistic theories regarding the causes of language change, with a particular focus on the spontaneous innovation aspect of code-switching.

One excerpt studied by Ulinuha and Parnawati features a scene in which a character exclaims the Japanese words “mitte, mitte!” after noticing a skewer that has fallen from a vendor's cart. The scholars argue that the character switches from English to Japanese “to show her astonishment of the skewered food” (Ulinuha and Parnawati 4-5). Referring to Lüdke and Keller's *invisible hand theory*—which posits that language change arises from the cumulative effect of goal-oriented yet unconscious actions—Ulinuha and Parnawati (5) interpret the character's code-switching as an outcome of circumstance and innovation within the communicative situation.

It should be reiterated that the dialogue under discussion involves literary characters, creations of the American writer Arthur Golden. In considering the film adaptation, as Ulinuha and Parnawati occasionally do, the influence of the scriptwriter Robin Swicord (also American) and the director Rob Marshall (American) must also be acknowledged as having shaped the dialogue. However, none of these creators are addressed in the analysis. Instead, the sociolinguistic examination appears to proceed as though the utterances occurred in a real-world setting, involving genuine individuals engaged in collective communication and adapting their linguistic behaviour accordingly. In reality, it is the writer who adapts the dialogue to fit the constraints and ideas underlying the specific literary work.

Turning to a broader discussion of the challenges posed by literature's inherent ambiguity, literary texts possess a capacity for irony and polysemy, which can only be adequately assessed by considering the integrity of the work and the underlying presence of the author. As Philippe Hamon demonstrates, irony arises from a “re-modulation” of discourse—a narrative disruption that directs the reader's

attention to a peripheral object emphasised by the author's indirect gaze (Hamon 7-8). This process inherently differentiates between author and character, a distinction that is always a possibility. This differentiation becomes particularly pronounced in cases of dramatic irony, where the reader holds more information than one or more characters. Such information might relate to events preceding the story or to the true identity of a character (Salmon 95). In these instances, the character's behaviour is framed by the communication of information between author and reader, with the former inviting the latter to engage in a playful, mocking interpretation. This narrative interplay is crucial for analysing characters' behaviour and speech but can easily be overlooked if utterances are examined in isolation, as though they were independent events rather than parts of a larger narrative and aesthetic concept.

Furthermore, literary works often employ enunciator irony, whereby the author's presence is subtly implied through recurring words or physical traits that guide the reader to interpret certain characters' utterances as accompanied by an authorial voice (Booth; Hamon). This second layer of interpretation, producing an irony effect, does not negate the primary level of meaning but instead scaffolds it, offering complementary perspectives. In literature, the effect, meaning, and essence of the text are constructed through various polysemic systems that permeate the work. Irony and structural unreliability are only one form of the ambiguities deliberately crafted by the author. This is not to suggest that every reader must uncover all these subtle meanings but rather that serious engagement with a literary text requires openness to the possibility of internal references that are not explicitly stated and depend on the reader's aesthetic sensibility. Such ironies and ambiguities are not mere "easter eggs" for a select few to discover and enjoy but are fundamental elements of literature.

A related but distinct type of ambiguity arises from *ostranenie* or estrangement, a technique previously mentioned (Shklovsky). This approach may present speakers as detached from their communities, perceiving objects and people as though encountering them for the first time. The goal of this method is to liberate readers, enabling them to return to a more innocent and unfiltered perception of the world. A parallel form of ambiguity is seen in absurd literature, where dialogues may appear nonsensical yet possess aesthetic meaning. As Lambrou observes, absurd dialogue's "prolonged flouting of the conversational maxims foregrounds the

continuous wordplay between the characters, who appear to be completely in sync with each other despite their uncooperative answers” (Lambrou 145).

Consequently, the language in such texts often bears little resemblance to the socially constructed language typically studied and analysed by sociolinguists. While not all writers aim for this defamiliarising effect, the potential for such an approach is intrinsic to the literary genre. It is therefore vital for those engaging with literary texts to recognise—or at least remain open to the possibility—that the author has written with specific, albeit sometimes obscure, intentions. Even when the goal is not to disrupt habitual thinking, literary works almost always strive to achieve more than merely conveying a fixed message (Cohn; Hilgers). Ignoring this fundamental aspect when analysing fictional speech risks producing questionable conclusions, as it overlooks the deliberate deviation from conventional social language that is often central to the author’s intent.

Conclusion

Sociolinguistic research that employs fictional literature as data encounters several challenges. In addition to the issues already theorised (e.g., Bowles; Cheetham; Ducrot; Lambrou; Ryan; Thomas), there is the risk of circular causality, whereby sociolinguists assume that utterances in literary texts reflect the real world and then draw conclusions about historical contexts based on this assumption. A second challenge arises in the analysis of dialogue between characters. Interpreting conversations in fictional settings as if the words were spoken by real people overlooks the many types of ambiguity and unreliability intrinsic to literary discourse. From a literary scholar’s perspective, it seems reasonable to address these inherent ambiguities, at the very least, when justifying the choice of data and method of analysis. The complexity of the enunciation model in literary fiction must be acknowledged, as highlighted by theoretical frameworks such as Wayne Booth’s concept of the implied author (Booth 431), Oswald Ducrot’s distinction between *locuteur* and *énonciateur* (Ducrot 99), and Erving Goffman’s four-part responsibility structure involving the author, animator, principal, and figure. The prevalence of unreliability, defamiliarisation effects, and other distinctly literary features necessitates a different level of attention compared to the analysis of non-literary data and demands specific methodologies.

One way to resolve the problem of circular causality is to treat social and literary discourse independently, using one as an illustrative resource for the other rather than as direct evidence. Many linguists already adopt this approach. Susan Mandala, for example, employs linguistic models to gain deeper insights into literary drama, arguing that “bringing explicit linguistic knowledge of talk to bear on the study of dialogue in plays can enrich our understanding of those plays” (Mandala 115). Similarly, identifying and analysing narrative devices enables the revision of linguistic patterns in human dialogue and their potential causes. There are numerous other angles from which this type of comparative research could be developed, such as exploring defamiliarisation in literature, social media, and/or political speech. In all cases, it is essential to analyse each text according to the specific conditions of its production, including its aims, context, and explicit or implicit addressees. This careful consideration allows for more precise and meaningful interpretations of the material, its causes, and its potential effects. It is not only literary language that is shaped by its context; every communicative situation exerts a certain pressure on the speaker, and linguistic performance is always contextually conditioned. The argument advanced in this article is that literary language is conditioned in distinctive ways, and this specificity must be accounted for in study design and methodological approaches.

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