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## Readers Closing in on Immoral Characters' Consciousness. Effects of Free Indirect Discourse on Response to Literary Narratives

Free indirect discourse (FID) is a widely studied mode of speech and consciousness representation in narratives. One aspect of analysis and debate is the combination of the characters' stream of consciousness and the narrator's voice. Various ideas about the effects FID might have on readers have been formulated. Some of these hypotheses are contradictory, which makes them an excellent starting point for reader response studies. More in particular, there seems to be disagreement whether FID increases or decreases readers' empathy for story characters. Also, there is no consensus concerning the effect on the transparency of the narrator's stance toward the story character, nor on the clarity of the implied author's intentions. Rather than adding theoretical arguments, historical evidence, or exegeses of textual examples, the present contribution attempts to explore the empirical validity of FID hypotheses in a series of reading experiments.

Previous studies by Schram (1985), and Bortolussi and Dixon (2003) suggest that FID does increase readers' sympathy for, and understanding of a character. Results of Van Peer and Pander Maat (1996; 2001) and Hakemulder (2000) on the effects of focalization add to the plausible conclusion that FID enhances readers' sympathy, understanding, and may even affect moral judgment. However, it remains complex to accurately predict the effects, partly because they seem to depend on idiosyncrasies of the literary texts used in the studies, as well as on background variables of the readers participating in them.

The present contribution aims to add to the available insights by investigating responses to a text with an apparent ironic undertone; since irony is a central element in the discussions concerning FID. Second, we wanted to see whether it would be possible to replicate findings of earlier studies on FID while using a story with an immoral character. This would improve the match between theorists' claims and empirical evidence. The studies presented examined whether FID affects the (perceived) clarity of the moral of an ironic story, whether FID enhances or reduces the visibility of character's thoughts and feelings, and whether FID influences readers' sympathy, understanding, and/or judgment of an immoral character.

We conducted four studies among undergraduate students, using rewritten versions of a short literary story, Tadeusz Borowski's 'The Record'. In the first two studies participants were randomly assigned to either reading the original version or our manipulation. The original was dominated by direct speech and contained hardly any FID. In our manipulation we maintained the information provided but transposed much of it into FID. In the first study we tested the effects of our manipulation among students of Theatre, Film and Television Studies. We found that FID made it difficult for them to distinguish the opinion of the narrator. In the second study we contrasted our findings with responses from students of literature. For this sample we found that FID may have led to higher levels of sympathy for the main character compared to the original version. However, comparison of the first two studies suggests that readers' backgrounds override the effects of the text factors. Nevertheless, some indications for an interaction of the two were found.

In the third and fourth study we took the text manipulation of Studies 1 and 2 one step further. We hypothesized that even higher percentages of FID were required to obtain the predicted effects. In the first two studies only direct discourse had been replaced with FID. At one important moment, however, the narrator's text was left as it was. It was expected that replacing that section with a FID version could promote readers' understanding of the character. Finally, in the fourth study, we investigated the role of reading frequency. We assumed that participants who read often for pleasure might be more sensitive to the subtleties of FID (cf. Dixon et al. 1993). In our analyses we contrasted responses of 'low reading frequency' and 'high reading frequency' participants, a (median-split) distinction based on self-report of the number of hours spent on reading for pleasure per week.

In both the third and fourth study we found that the text manipulation yielded a main effect on the perceived visibility of the characters' feelings and thoughts: FID led to a higher perceived character visibility than the original narrator version. In other words, the stylistic device under investigation gave readers the impression that they learned more about the inner life of the character where in fact they received the same information. Moreover, FID enhanced tendencies of readers toward external attribution, that is, explaining characters' behavior in terms of situational factors rather than personality. This was interpreted as indirect evidence that FID stimulates readers to view story events from the perspective of the character. No direct evidence was found that reading frequency had a mediating effect.

The results of these studies demonstrate that the effects of FID are limited, at least when we consider the strength and range of the predicted effects. While the general effect on visibility of characters' consciousness appears robust, there were no consistent effects of FID on variables like empathy or sympathy with the character and variables pertaining to the perception of the author's opinion and the moral of the story.

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