ABSTRACTS

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Unreliability
The Pragmatic Perspective Revisited

Unreliability has been discussed from the vantage point of literary theory, and in particular narratology, for several decades; as the predominant concepts in these disciplines have shifted, so has the notion of what constitutes the notion of unreliability in a narrative. The account presented here approaches unreliability not from within literary theory, but from a linguistic and pragmatic perspective. It is rooted in the pragmatics of cooperation and interaction and the associated pragmatic models: Gricean conversation maxims, relevance and politeness theory, speech act theory and conversation analysis.

Based on this theoretical framework, unreliable narratives are described as utterances that have, at their core, a deceptive and thus uncooperative stance; unreliability is thus based on the violation of the Gricean Cooperative Principle and its maxims of quality and quantity. The fact that such maxim violations, when not intended as an implicature, go against the grain of purposeful and cooperative communication helps to explain the striking aesthetic effects that unreliable narratives often create, such as suspense, humor and a distinct sense of surprise in the reader. Based on this initial description, this paper discusses the question of author and narrator and their respective roles in the creation of unreliability; the model presented here conceives of unreliable discourse as dual or echoic utterances that are shared between the fictional narrator persona and the real-world author in a case of simultaneous use/mention semiotics.

In addition, the existence of so-called unreliability markers, or microlinguistic cues for unreliability, is discussed. Based on the pragmatic and linguistic framework employed here, it is emphasized that microlinguistic features are neither sufficient nor necessary for a narrative to be unreliable; the fact that certain bundles of features are nevertheless frequently observed in such texts is here explained in terms of recurrent politeness strategies, as well as the simulation of orality and thus closeness in such discourse.

Finally, an outlook is provided that links up this pragmatic account of unreliability with certain trends in cognitive linguistics and stylistics, thus suggesting that the cognitive turn that has influenced recent literary studies and a linguistic

approach to literary discourse are far from irreconcilable but share, in fact, a lot of common ground.

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