

Ledia Kazazi, PhD Candidate
“Aleksandër Xhuvani” University
Faculty of Human Sciences
lediakazazi@gmail.com

Isotopy and textual coherence in Martin Camaj’s fiction

Abstract

A text is considered as a linguistic entity made up of linguistic signs and characterized by cohesion and coherence. It is an occurring manifestation of language and as such it carries on a specific meaning. The definition of the meaning of a text is very complex. This is mainly due to the fact that it does not contain only explicit information but encodes a variety of implicit knowledge as well. The literary text is one example of this. The interpretation of the literary text broadly depends on the literary experience of the reader. The former only takes on life after it is realized by the latter. Semiotics makes extensive use of the concept of isotopy when it comes to the interpretation of literary texts. Isotopy is a concept from Greimas’s semio-narrative model, made up of semes, classemes and sememes. In practice, it serves as a strategy or principle that guarantees homologous interpretation of any text or text segment. The detection and identification of isotopies inside the text would provide different levels of familiarity within the narrative, offering so a uniform reading of it and at the same time proving its coherence and eliminating possible ambiguities. The prose fiction of the Albanian author, Martin Camaj contains a wide range of isotopic chains. Each isotopic chain represents a theme inside the narrative and is blended perfectly with all the other textual components. This article aims at providing a brief theoretical account on the concept of isotopy and through the analysis and interpretation of different isotopic chains inside the narrative of Martin Camaj coming to the conclusion that this kind of analysis is very important for a uniform interpretation of the text. This is also considered as a confirmation of textual coherence.

Key words: *isotopy, textual coherence, interpretation, semiotics, sign*

1. Introduction

There are different theories related with text interpretation and the study of meaning within a text. Structural semantics considers meaning to be divided into smaller components. The concept of isotopy developed by Greimas is a method of study that divides the text into elements like semes, classemes and sememes which belong to the same lexical field. Their identification would provide a homologous interpretation of the text and offer a uniform reading of it. At the same time the presence of isotopies inside the text confirms the coherence of the text. Coherence is a very important feature when it comes to text interpretation and text clarity. The present article will try to provide a theoretical background on some important relevant issues such as the definition of the “text”, the definition of textual coherence and isotopy and how these interact with each other. A brief analysis of the isotopy of nature from some of the prose works of Martin Camaj will also be included.

2. Defining the “text”

The text is generally defined as a linguistic entity that provides communication, whether in a spoken or written form. Linguistics has a different view on this category. From the linguistic point of view, a text is an entity made up of linguistic signs and characterized by cohesion and coherence. So, according to Werlich a text is an extended structure of syntactic units such as words, groups, and clauses and textual units that is marked by both coherence among the elements and completion. A non-text consists of random sequences of linguistic units such as sentences, paragraphs, or sections in any temporal and/or spatial extension. (Werlich, 1976, p. 23) De Beaugrande and Dressler define the text as a naturally occurring manifestation of language, i.e. as a communicative language event in a context. The “surface text” is the set of expressions actually used; these expressions make some knowledge “explicit”, while other knowledge remains “implicit”, though still applied during processing. (Beugrande & Dressler, 1981, p. 63) The literary text is a specific kind of text. It does not contain one specific meaning but offers a variety of meanings. The perception of different readers may be different and also differ from the aim of the author. However, according to Lotman there is a structural connection that enfolds all the levels of the text. (Pozzato, 2009, p. 135)

3. Textual Coherence

Coherence is a key concept in the characterization of the text. It is a very important feature as far as text comprehension and text clarity is concerned. There are different definitions of coherence. According to Halliday and Hasan a text must fulfill two conditions in order to be coherent: Firstly, it has to be consistent with the context in which it is created. Secondly, all the parts of the text must be connected by cohesive devices, thus the text must contain cohesion. (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, p. 23) Teun van Dijk defines coherence as a semantic property of discourse (text), based on the interpretation of each sentence relative to the interpretation of other sentences. (Dijk, 1977, p. 96) He also distinguishes two levels of coherence: linear coherence and global coherence. The first is characterized by relations expressed between the propositions of sentences and the latter is more general

and is concerned with the text as a whole rather than with individual sequences. Van Dijk also identifies a general overall semantic structure of the text, defined as macrostructure. It is a semantic representation of discourse/text and has a hierarchical organization. The macrostructure determines the global coherence of a text which is itself determined by the linear coherence of sequences. This theory can be better operated on a narrative discourse rather than on a spoken one.

De Beaugrande & Dressler share the opinion that coherence is concerned with the ways in which all the components of the textual world (the components that underline the surface text) are mutually accessible and relevant. (Beugrande & Dressler, 1981, p. 4) This point of view suggests that linguistic devices are not enough to deliver coherence. The meaning of a text is fully realized only after it is perceived by a reader. This might suggest that coherence also involves the study of other extra linguistic factors such as the language user's knowledge of the world and context. It is the result of the interaction of linguistic and extra linguistic factors.

4. The concept of Isotopy according to Structural Semantics

Structural semantics studies the way smaller elements of meaning inside sentences build the general, overall meaning of a text. It states that meaning can be divided into smaller elements. In this case a text is considered as a structure and its meaning is realized only after one sign is associated with other signs. These associations depend on similarity or contiguity between signifiers and signified. (Coseriu, 1981, p. 16)

Isotopy can be defined as the repetition of a series of certain abstract and concrete semes throughout a text. It is like a semantic line that is present along the whole text and guarantees the coherence of the text. However it must be stated that the repetition of some words or semantic items is not enough to guarantee textual coherence. An isotopy refers to a level of meaning which is established by the recurrence in a text of semes belonging to the same semantic field, and which contributes to our interpretation of the theme. (Wales, 1989, p. 265) Greimas defines isotopy as "the principle that allows semantic concatenation". In his first approach Greimas develops the theory of textual coherence on the basis of the concept of textual semes: The itaritivity (reoccurrence) of textual semes, which connect the semantic elements of discourse (sememes) assures its textual homogeneity and coherence. (Noth, 1990, p. 319) Greimas also distinguishes three types of isotopies: simple isotopies, which occur in those cases when the text has just one interpretation; bi-isotopies, which belong to texts that provide two simultaneous readings and poly isotopies which occur in cases of superimposition of several semantic levels in a text.

5. Isotopy and Coherence

As mentioned above, the text is a very complex entity. Thus its interpretation cannot be based just on linguistic means. The cultural background knowledge of the reader, the context and other extra linguistic factors might be crucial for a most accurate interpretation. However, isotopy can function as a guide for the

reader who after organizing the semantic and lexical fields in coherent networks will be able to understand the information and indices revealed by the text. The coherence of a text can be proved and depends on how the reader is capable of bringing together similar or compatible themes.

6. Isotopy in Camaj's fiction

Martin Camaj is a writer of major significance to modern Albanian literature. His literary activities cover a period of forty five years over which there have been several phases of development. He is the author of several prose works, one of which, "Circles", considered to be the first psychological Albanian novel, took fifteen years to write. Another great success of his career is the dystopian novel "Karpa", set on the banks of the river Drin in 2338. The general themes that occur in Camaj's works are the loss of tradition, loneliness in a changing world and the continuous search for one's roots. (Elsie, 2005, p. 186) Being an author in exile, his mind always travelled in the Albanian landscape and thus providing the most vivid images of it to the reader.

Camaj makes extensive usage of isotopic chains in order to preserve the textual coherence of his texts, never deviating from the main line of his works: the Northern Albanian nature and costumes. As a result the main isotopys present in his works is the isotopy of nature. The semes that constitute the isotopy of nature are: mal, bjeshkë, vërrri, fushë (mountain, highland, winter pasture, field).

According to the Dictionary of Albanian Language of 1984 (Fjalor i Shqipëse se Sotme, 1984, p. 1052), the seme /mal/ (mountain) contains these semantic components:

- vend shumë i ngritur (very high place)
- i dukshëm (noticeable)
- masë e forte dheu dhe gurësh (strong pile of soil and stones)
- masë e madhe (big)
- i lartë, më i lartë se kodra (high, higher than the hill)
- i thepisur (craggy)
- me majë, kreshta, shpate që zbresin deri në lugina (pointed, with crests and slopes that go down to the valleys)
- i pjerrët (slanting)
- sipërfaqe e pyllëzuar ose jo (wooden or not wooden surface)
- me klimë të ashpër (with a very harsh climate)
- krahinë si vendbanim (dwelling province)
- krahinë si njësi etnografike (ethnographic area)

According to the Dictionary of Albanian Language, (Fjalor i Shqipëse se Sotme, 1984, p. 155) the seme /bjeshkë/ (highland) contains these semantic components:

- o vend shumë i ngritur (very high place)
- o i dukshëm (noticeable)
- o masë e forte dheu dhe gurësh (strong pile of soil and stones)
- o masë e madhe (big)
- o mal i lartë (high mountain)
- o me majë, kreshta, shpate që zbresin deri në lugina (pointed, with

crests and slopes that go down to the valleys)

- i thepisur (craggy)
- i pjerrët (slanting)
- kullotë verore (summer pasture)

According to the Dictionary of Albanian Language (Fjalor i Shqipes se Sotme, 1984, p. 2160) the seme /vërri/ (winter pasture) contains these semantic components:

- vend më i ulët se bjeshka në mal (a place in a mountain lower than the highland)
- i ngrohtë (warm)
- që nuk e zë era (untouched by the wind)
- kullotë dimërore (winter pasture)

According to the Dictionary of Albanian Language (Fjalor i Shqipes se Sotme, 1984, p. 521) the seme /fushë/ (field) contains these semantic components:

- vend i rrafshët (flat place)
- i hapur (opened)
- i gjerë (vast)
- pa male e pa kodra (with no mountains or hills)
- zakonisht e papyllëzuar (mainly with no woods)
- hapësirë natyrore e sheshtë (flat natural surface)

All the above analyzed semes share a common feature, the geographic one as well as economical one or the features connected to the relief in general. For example the seme /mal/ (mountain) and the seme /bjeshkë/(highland) have in common the fact that they are very high and noticeable places made up of soils and stones. They are also craggy, slanting and pointed with crests and slopes that go down to the valleys. The seme /bjeshkë/ and the seme /vërri/ are both pastures, the first a winter pasture and the second a summer pasture. /vërri/ and /fushë/ are also similar because both of them are lower flat surfaces. These common features unite these semes inside a domain or lexical field. Their continuous repetition throughout the text is a very significant sign of textual coherence. As mentioned in the previous section, the detailed description of the landscape of his birthplace is a very preferred theme in Camaj's work. All the colors and flavors of the North of Albania are portrayed in the text as vividly as they have always been in the mind of the author. All the previously analyzed semes, as well as their semantic components are beautifully arranged in order to clearly represent the elements of a rugged landscape, typical for the area of the Albanian Alps, the author's birthplace.

7. Conclusions

As one of the key elements of a text, coherence occupies a very important position in linguistic studies. Structural semantics offers a method of deducting the coherence of the text. It suggests that the meaning is divided into smaller elements called sememes. The concept of isotopy, broadly used in the field of semiotics too, offers a uniform interpretation of the text. It refers to a level of meaning where there

is a reoccurrence of semes belonging to the same semantic field. This repetition guarantees the coherence of the text. As the text takes on life only after it is realized by the reader, isotopy works as a guide for the latter, permitting a more accurate reading. In the work in prose of the Albanian writer in exile Martin Camaj there is a central theme which is present in almost all his works: the search for one's roots. It looks like he never lost the ties with his country since the detailed descriptions of the northern Albanian landscape are very vivid and colorful. His texts are very coherent considering the presence of semes sharing common geographical features that make up the isotopy of nature. The identification of this isotopy would provide the reader with the necessary cultural background which is crucial for the interpretation of this author's texts.

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Proverbat në gjuhën angleze dhe shqipe: veçoritë sematike, klasifikimi dhe tipet e motivimit kuptimor

MSc. Lorena ROBO

