

STRATEGIES OF COMMUNICATION IN BROWNING'S MY LAST DUCHESS

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Abstract: The main purpose of this study is to establish the communicative situation at work in Browning's My Last Duchess. The main focus will be placed on the rhetorical nature of indirectness and also the relevance theoretical concepts of interpreting that can give a useful way to re-theorise the use of voice in literature.

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Pragmatics has at times tried to polarize linguists and theorists of literature. They tried to analyze literary texts which actually posed problems when it came to the issue of their introduction into the study of pragmatics. The question to be answered was whether literature should be regarded as a form of communication and if so, why its study can or cannot be integrated into pragmatic theory. Literature should be inserted in the study of language in use (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 122) as another form of communication and it does not need to be regarded as a special case.

The aim of this article is to contribute to the growing significance of relevance theory in literary studies, and also to contribute to the development of concepts within relevance theory itself, by focusing on rhetorical indirectness and the use of voice in literature. This will be illustrated with reference to the speech of the Duke of Ferrara in Browning's poem *My Last Duchess*.

Sperber and Wilson relate to the ways in which different types of indirectness accomplish their effects. In successful communication, the indirect nature of the utterance chosen will lead to extra contextual effects which compensate for the extra processing effort imposed on the hearer. This indirectness can take many forms and, of course, the extra effects can be also various.

The Duke of Ferrara's monologue in *My Last Duchess* contains an intriguing series of indirect vocal expressions addressed to a silent hearer by which he transmits a set of implicatures (e.g. My previous wife used to flirt and that made me angry. Because of that, I had her killed. The woman I am about to marry should be warned because she also flirts and I will do the same to her...). The moments of indirectness in the poem are many. The aim here is to show the way in which relevance theory would see the inferencing processes involved in this case of indirect communication and thus pointing out the rhetorical potential of indirectness.

At the beginning of the poem (line 2-3), the Duke refers to a painting of his previous wife: "I call/That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands". The comma used before *now*

causes a pause and in this way emphasizes it, it is suggested that there was a time when he did not consider the painting so wonderful. So, here we have multiple various interpretative hypotheses: 1. The Duke may not have believed that the painting was well-painted;

2. The Duke places a higher value on the work of art now that his previous wife is dead;

3. He used to dislike the painting but now he does not any longer

Later on in the poem we have other related interpretative ideas which complete the above 3rd hypothesis. The following contributed to the eliminating process: the expressions in brackets – “(since none puts by/The curtain I have drawn for you, but I) (lines 9-10) and the Duke’s explanation for the unusual quality of the painting: “Sir, 'twas not/ Her husband's presence only, called that spot/ Of joy into the Duchess' cheek” (lines 13-15) – Dukes usually being in the absolute power in their own houses, we assume that no one else draws back this curtain because he does not let anyone do that, or, there is the other possibility that perhaps no one wants to draw back the curtain. We understand here that the Duke only wants a selected number of people to watch the painting (see the 3rd hypothesis). Both of these are then strengthened by implicatures of the word *only* (line 14) where we get that: if the Duchess’s “spot of joy” (blush) is sometimes caused by her husband’s presence, we assume that it is a blush indicating a sexual relationship maybe not confined to her relationship with her husband, thus we reach the conclusion that the Duchess’s relative sexual freedom annoyed the Duke. We can even strengthen the hypothesis that there is something delicate about the painting from the duke’s part and the fact that she is now dead the source of annoyance is no longer so great as to stop the Duke from calling the painting a “wonder”.

All these implicatures are then confirmed in the 15-34 lines and 43-45 even if it is important to say that the Duke never directly said that his wife used to flirt and that thing was a source of annoyance for him.

As the second part of the whole message transmitted by the Duke, we have again indirect information about his decision of the problem: “This grew; I gave commands;/Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands/ As if alive.” (lines 45-47). These lines, with the sequence of the first three clauses and the missing of any connectivity, make us interpret the cause and effect relationship between the events described: maybe because of the Duchess’s becoming flirtatious, the Duke ‘gave commands’ and maybe because of these ‘commands’, ‘all smiles stopped together’ which meant they were extremely serious. We have here again more possibilities of interpretation: 1. the Duke may have ordered the Duchess to stop flirting and, as a consequence, she felt depressed; 2. The Duke took something the Duchess liked, perhaps her mule (line 27) and thus she was unhappy; 3. The Duke had her killed. The final sentence: ‘There she stands/ As if alive’ (lines 46-47) brings no new information, but draws attention to it as old information (lines 2-4). This also reminds us that the Duchess is dead. We are invited to reconsider this information in the newly enriched context and thus emphasizing the 3rd hypothesis: that the Duchess’s death was set up by the Duke.

In a real situation, the relevance of this narrative would be clear. In fact, this entire narrative is an indirect warning to the Count’s daughter who is supposed to become the Duke’s next wife. We get this interpretation from the Duke’s turning his (and our) attention to the present, to the following marriage negotiations. At the end of the poem we have another reference to an object of art (lines 54-56), the Duke’s apparently casual remark being relevant to the hearer who understands that the parallel with the powerful Neptune taming a delicate sea-horse refers to the Duke’s own intentions.

The Duke transmits this fact indirectly again, as it is not advisable to claim responsibility for a murder, thus minimizing his implications in the unfortunate action. Nothing is said directly, so the hearer is more responsible for the interpretations s/he makes. The two-way strengthening and assuring of assumptions partly outlined above gets us to an interpretation which does not permit much ambiguity as the contextual information is so complete that the content of the message is like directly transmitted by the Duke. His implied arrogance would otherwise pose no problem in transmitting the message directly.

The Duke's indirectness is thus seen as a strategy for manipulating and intimidating the hearer. He gives an impression of power and skill that the hearer is forced to work at interpreting the message by making connections between the apparently unrelated declarations. In *My Last Duchess*, the Duke's interjections: 'how shall I say' (line 22) and "Even had you skill/ In speech – which I have not" (line 36) are contrasting with what is in fact a rhetorical display. The Duke's indirectness of message will indicate the Duke's disregard for the hearer. The impact of the message is also stronger as it may not be interpreted immediately, being like a puzzle to which the hearer returns all the time to get to a good interpretation. Once the hearer had reached a conclusion, there will be little doubt about the fact that it is or not the right one.

The above presented communicative strategy is relatively simple if compared to that between Browning and the reader. In a dramatic monologue the reader's position overlaps that of the silent hearer, so that, like the silent use of the Count in *My Last Duchess*, we have to figure out the Duke's utterances and get to the interpretations of them described above. For example, we do not know who the hearer is at the beginning of the poem, we can only guess his identity, but at the end of the poem we get some information: 'The Count your master's known munificence...' (line 49). So the reader must guess from the presented information.

There are numerous examples like this, where the information needs to be enriched or clarified for the reader because s/he does not have access to the same contextual information as the hearer. Browning has cleverly managed to draw attention to the predicament and viewpoint of a woman in an unequal marriage through the monologue of a fictional character who represents an endorsement of the attitudes and power structures which allow for such marriages; that is presenting one view, he communicates another (Maxwell, 1992: 322).

The conclusion to be drawn is that Browning uses the dramatic monologue to express views and attitudes from which he distances himself. The possibilities for narrative layering complicate the interpretative / echoic framework in that an author might distance him-/herself from an implied author; or from a first-person narrator, who in turn might distance him-/herself from an internal narrator; or from a character's view expressed through free indirect/direct discourse. The Duke of Ferrara does just this (lines 37-39) in voicing the things that a different kind of husband might have said to his Duchess.

There are many possibilities here to be explored; the concepts of interpretative and echoic use seem adequate to be used as a means of resolving one of the separation between pragmatics and literary studies.

3 That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.

Will 't please you sit and look at her? I said
 "Frà Pandolf" by design, for never read
 Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
 The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
 9 But to myself they turned (since none puts by
 The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
 And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
 How such a glance came there; so, not the first
 Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
 Her husband's presence only, called that spot
 15 Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
 Frà Pandolf chanced to say, "Her mantle laps
 Over my Lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
 Must never hope to reproduce the faint
 Half-flush that dies along her throat"; such stuff
 Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
 21 For calling up that spot of joy. She had
 A heart . . . how shall I say? . . . too soon made glad,
 Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
 She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
 Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
 The dropping of the daylight in the West,
 The bough of cherries some officious fool
 28 Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
 She rode with round the terrace--all and each
 Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
 Or blush, at least. She thanked men,--good; but thanked
 Somehow . . . I know not how . . . as if she ranked
 My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
 With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
 35 This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
 In speech--(which I have not)--to make your will
 Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this
 Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
 Or there exceed the mark"--and if she let
 Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
 Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
 42 --E'en then would be some stooping; and I chuse
 Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
 Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
 Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
 Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
 47 As if alive. Will 't please you rise? We'll meet
 The company below, then. I repeat,
 The Count your Master's known munificence
 Is ample warrant that no just pretence
 Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;

