

Ambiguity Effect in the Fiction Reading Process: A Cognitive Narratology Perspective

Grebeniuk Tetiana

Prof. of Zaporizhzhia State Medical University

Abstract

Ambiguity in fictional narration is utterly conducive to reader's interest arousing. A branch of humanities, considering this function of ambiguity as an object of special studies, is cognitive narratology. Scholars of this branch consider main linguistic means of ambiguity effect on a recipient during her/his reading of a fictional work. This study aims to review the most significant conceptions of ambiguity state, formed on the linguistic level of a fictional text, within the scope of cognitive narratology.

Roger C. Schank and Peter Stockwell view ambiguity state forming in the context of theory of scripts – structured representations, describing a stereotyped row of events in a particular context. Lubomir Dolezel, David Herman, Ruth Ronen, Marie-Laure Ryan, and Lisa Zunshine analyze gaps and their bridging while the flow of narration in the frame of possible-world theory. Porter H. Abbott, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, and Meir Sternberg consider ways of meaning-making by means of narrative gaps and pay special attention to suspense effect as one of the most intense expressions of narrative ambiguity. Study of ambiguity is a very productive task of cognitive narratology because it gives us unique means of observation of connections between mind and narrative.

1. Ambiguity in a discourse of cognitive narratology

Ambiguity in fictional narration is one of the most effective mechanisms of reader's interest arousing. A branch of humanities, considering this function of ambiguity as an object of special studies, is cognitive narratology.

David Herman specifies sphere of its investigations: “Approaches to narrative study that fall under the heading of cognitive narratology share a focus on the mental states, capacities, and dispositions that provide grounds for – or, conversely, are grounded in – narrative experiences” (2014: 46). Authors of the edition “Stories and minds: cognitive approaches to literary narrative” view cognitive narratology as the third phase of development of narratology as an independent field of study. They consider as previous stages: 1) hermeneutic phase, associated with phenomenology (forerunner of narratology), and 2) structuralist period (narratology proper) (2013: 4–6).

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2. Significance of semantic gaps in a narrative structure

There is no narration, which includes all aspects of the fictional world functioning. Discontinuity is immanent in its structure. If the world of a fictional work can be viewed as infinite, then the fictional narrative has its limits, determined by its functions, genre and, at last, by the material nature of writing itself. Bridging semantic gaps is a reader’s activity throughout all reading process. And this filling the gaps can be obviously considered as development of recipient’s cognitive capabilities.

In “The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative” gaps are explained by H. Porter Abbott as

... the inevitable voids, large or small, in any narrative that the reader is called upon to fill from his or her experience or imagination. In the intentional interpretation of fictional narrative, this process is limited to what is consistent with the text and its cues. In historical and other forms of nonfiction narrative, it is possible to fill critical gaps through further research. (2007: 234)

Gaps are powerful means of forming of the reader's interest to the narrative. Writers often use this instrument, for instance, to attract reader's attention to the text at its beginning.

Nowadays, the closest attention to the problem of gaps reception is being paid in studies by Porter H. Abbott, Lubomir Dolezel, Monika Fludernik, David Herman, Manfred Jahn, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Ruth Ronen, Marie-Laure Ryan, Roger C. Schank, Meir Sternberg, Peter Stockwell, Pikor Wojciech, Lisa Zunshine and many others.

3. Scripts as a means of filling of semantic gaps

Investigations in artificial intelligence area take a specific place in the discourse of receptive ambiguity. We can analyze adoption of hard science categories in sphere of humanities by example of the term *script*.

An American scientist Roger Carl Schank (in co-authorship with Robert Paul Abelson) developed theory of scripts. Its sense is based on the ability of a person – with the help of her/his memory material – to fill the gaps in the notion about actions of other people, creating in this way a story of somebody's life.

According to Schank, script is “a set of expectations about what will happen next in a well-understood situation.” (1995: 7) As a theorist write, “Life experience means quite often knowing how to act and how others will act in given stereotypical situations. That knowledge is called a script.” (1995: 7)

Script can be interpreted as a memory structure, a way of filling a semantic gap with stereotype material, so a person avoids a need to think creatively in stereotype situations. But Roger Schank himself says that scripts limit freedom of interpretation.

On the basis of Schank's investigations, an English philologist Peter Stockwell proposed his theory of cognitive poetics where the concept *script* was adapted to the needs of linguistics and literary studies (in his subsequent works he called it a *schema*). According to Stockwell, script is “the conceptual structure drawn from memory to assist in understanding utterances” (2002: 77); “a socioculturally

defined mental protocol for negotiating a situation.” (2002: 77) During the reading process filling of scripts depends on both expressive means of a work and specific recipient’s experience. Scripts (schemas) in a work can be situational, personal, and instrumental. Scripts are divided into slots, “that are assumed to pertain in a situation unless we are explicitly told otherwise: props; participants; entry conditions; results; and sequence of events.” (2002: 78)

4. A gap in a discourse of possible-world theory

Possible-world theory, adapted to literary studies by Lubomir Dolezel, David Herman, Ruth Ronen, and Marie-Laure Ryan is in a way similar to Schank’s and Stockwell’s theoretical models.

In particular, Lubomir Dolezel sees fictional world not as imitative in relation to reality but as independently constructed, although ontologically incomplete, having omissions (gaps). Some of them are temporary – a writer fills them up after a while, for example, giving us information about who is a murderer in a criminal novel. But some gaps are permanent. Dolezel considers dichotomy gaps/facts as representing presence or absence of certain constituents of the literary work “texture”.

Fictional world, according to the scientist, is being formed implicitly, at first, in author’s, then in reader’s consciousness. Interpreters (readers and literary critics) are looking for the implicit markers in the explicit, open structure of a work of literature. There are two types of these markers: negative (intentional gap) and positive (allusions, hints, tips). To decipher them, reader uses her/his own set of data about the real world and a work of fiction (“encyclopedia”) which can be different for each person. This discrepancy sometimes leads to different nuances in interpretation (1995).

An aim and context of analysis also matters for interpretation of a work, as the world of the same fictional work can be intentionally differently structured through different functions (1998: 141).

Ruth Ronen in her book “Possible Worlds in Literary Theory” goes deep into investigation of the problem of fundamental incompleteness of fictional worlds. She

considers gaps as constituents of this effect. She emphasizes that a reader tries to evaluate fictional worlds, by analogy with a real world, as a whole, elaborated in details, completely accessible. Ronen views incompleteness as a differentia of a fictional world (as opposed to a real one):

Incompleteness is thus the formal manifestation of a difference between reality and fiction, between an extraliterary real object and a fictional construct. Incompleteness reflects on both logical and semantic aspects of fictionality: it has to do with the essential status of fictional objects and with the verbal mode of their construction. (1994: 115)

As the scholar says, readers are free to choose a way of a fictional world perceiving: as an imprint of reality or as a fundamentally incomplete imaginary model, perceiving under the laws of aesthetics.

David Herman consents to this idea, asserting that “Lacunae or omissions in what is told or in the process of telling ... underscore the radical incompleteness of fictional worlds.” (2009: 187)

In works of scholars-narratologists ambiguity is connected with such universal perception phenomena as interest, surprise, and suspense. Israeli investigators Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan and Meir Sternberg, as well as an American narratologist Porter H. Abbott, pay close attention to the mechanisms of forming of these phenomena.

Rimmon-Kenan analyzes two ways of slowing down of comprehension and creating suspense: delay and gaps.

How to make a bagel? First you take a hole.... And how to make a narrative text? In exactly the same way. Holes or gaps are so central in narrative fiction because the materials the text provides for the reconstruction of a world (or a story) are insufficient for saturation. No matter how detailed the presentation is, further questions can always be asked; gaps always remain open. (2003: 131)

The scholar connects cognitive activity of a reader encountered textual ambiguity with the process of hypothesizing:

... reading can be seen as a continuous process of forming hypotheses, reinforcing them, developing them, modifying them, and sometimes replacing them by others or

dropping them altogether. It should be noted, however, that even rejected hypotheses may continue exercising some influence on the reader's comprehension (2003: 125)

Rimmon-Kenan pays meticulous attention to the study of hermeneutic type of gaps (or 'information gap'). Generally, the hermeneutical aspect of reading for Rimmon-Kenan "consists in detecting an enigma (a gap), searching for clues, forming hypotheses, trying to choose among them and (more often than not) constructing one finalized hypothesis." (2003, c. 132)

The philologist calls two types of gaps: temporary and permanent. Temporary gaps are being filled during narration, while permanent ones remain blank. A reader can distinguish them only retrospectively, after finishing reading process, and this uncertainty is one of the factors of the narration dynamization.

Rimmon-Kenan views temporary gaps arousing in the narration (not plot) system and connects their functioning with prolepses and analepses. They are closely related to prolepses through that ambiguity in which a reader is left after a hint about future development of the action. Their connection with analepses is a result of reconsideration of the previously given material in a new context and semantic surrounding.

Permanent gaps, as the narratologist says, exist in both story and text. "Thus a gap in the story entails a gap in the text, but a gap in the text need not entail a corresponding gap in the story," (2003: 133) she summarizes.

Depending on reader's awareness of the existence of a gap in the process of reading Rimmon-Kenan classifies prospective and retrospective gaps. We have prospective ones if a reader is aware of existence of them. Otherwise, if a text can prevent the reader from "asking the right question until it is answered", then we have a retrospective gap. Eventually, according to Rimmon-Kenan, "Whatever category the gap belongs to, it always enhances interest and curiosity, prolongs the reading process, and contributes to the reader's dynamic participation in making the text signify." (2003: 133)

Meir Sternberg views reading as a "gap-filling process" and investigates influence of semantic gaps upon reader's interest. He views three distinct functional

operation of the mind within narrative perception: prospection, retrospection, and recognition. These operations form the universals of narrative – suspense, curiosity, and surprise, respectively.

The scientist says that suspense “arises from rival scenarios about the future: from the discrepancy between what the telling lets us readers know about the happening (e.g., a conflict) at any moment and what still lies ahead, ambiguous because yet unresolved in the world.” (2001: 117) Curiosity is considered in Sternberg’s works as a result of reader’s attempts to bridge gaps in the knowledge about previous part of narrative. And surprise is interpreted as a consequence of unexpected denial of reader’s guesses about possible filling of the gaps.

An American researcher Porter Abbott appreciates meaningfulness of semantic gaps in narration. He says that one of the most important features of narrative is its capability to fill and create gaps at the same time.

Actually, Abbott discusses text interpretation process in context of such phenomena as underreading, overreading, gaps, cruxes, and themes and motifs repetition. As he says, we underread because it is very difficult to achieve, and then to maintain, an awareness of all the details of a narrative. Overreading, we see in narratives features and events, for which there is no direct evidence in the discourse.

But gaps make for theorist especially significant mechanism of sense-creation. Narrative itself is for Abbot just “art of the opening and closing of gaps.” (2007: 50) Analyzing ways of plot creation, he writes: “One urgent question evoked by the gap ... is what type of story (what plot in the first sense above) is in this gap?” (2007: 44)

Moreover, investigator pays close attention to such kind of gaps as *crux*: “...a crux is an oft-debated element in a work that, depending on how we interpret it, can significantly effect how we interpret the work as a whole.” (2002: 86) Abbot gives an example of a crux from the short story “Now I Lay Me” by Hemingway, viewing as a crux uncertainty in comprehension why protagonist’s mother burnt father’s collection of artifacts – to spite him or just out of foolishness.

Concerning scholarly interpretation of lacunar nature of suspense let us remember also integrating suspense conception by Marie-Laure Ryan. She proposes to consider this notion as joining of anticipation of future narration and reader's interest to filling the gaps in earlier story. Furthermore, narratologist proposes concept of meta-suspense as designation of reader's interest to the ways of realization of artistic design of work (2001).

In the context of separation of different types of semantic gaps, conception by Polish scholar Wojciech Pikor attracts investigator's attention. In his work "Luka jako strategia narracyjna w Księdze Jonasza" Pikor emphasizes important meaning of narrative gaps, asserting:

Luka poprzez brak informacji wnosi do narracji pewien element niejasności i niepewności, który zakłóca ciągłość opowiadanej historii. Takie działanie jest strategią świadomie przyjętą przez narratora, która wykorzystuje lukę dla większego zaangażowania czytelnika w process interpretacji tekstu. (2009: 13–14).

The scholar offers original classification of narrative gaps, considering different ways of introduction of them in narrative texture by example of Biblical Book of Jonah. This classification includes: 1) break of the chronological length; 2) break of the logical length; 3) discrepancy in assessments of two episodes; 4) breaking of the rules, regulating reality of narrative; 5) questions without answers; 6) "blanks" in texts (2009).

5. Gap-filling in a structure of protagonist's experience interiorization

If the all above-listed theories, mainly, view intellectual aspect of ambiguity, concentrating on what a reader is *thinking* while filling a gap, then the next group of theories reviewed is concerning about what a reader is *feeling*.

In particular, in works by Monika Fludernik, David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Lisa Zunshine this sphere of semantic gaps perception is being thoroughly investigated. The scholars analyze an emotional part of the narrative interiorization process, the ways of interaction of narrative material and reader's moral conventions.

Cognitivists mainly appeal to the classical work in this sphere – “Structuralist Poetics” by Jonathan Culler, written in 1975. Culler considers such notions as literary competence, convention, and naturalization. Culler’s term “naturalization” (stemming from the Russian formalists’ concept “motivation”) concerns readers’ interpretative strategies while reading. It is a process carried out by the reader as a response to the narrated material, an individualized way of adoption of literary conventions. This notion stipulates filling the narrative gaps in conformity with reader’s view of the world (2002).

Manfred Jahn, one of the founders of cognitive narratology says that “imaginary perception is a crucial concept in cognitive narratology” (2003: 202), and considers stories of two kinds – “external” and “internal”. As he asserts, external stories exist in physically tangible form, as we see, for example, in novels, anecdotes, movies, and plays. Internal stories can be qualified as “the stories which are stored in memory and performed in the mental theater of recollection, imagination, and dream.” (2003: 195)

Being aware of relativity of this typology, Jahn offers to approach it as a dynamic one: external story internalizes itself (correlating with the personal subject’s experience), and internal story always externalizes itself (being directed outside). In general, we can say that Jahn suggests rather a model of transitional states than one of contrastive categories.

A German narratologist Monika Fludernik believes that ambiguity acquired special significance precisely in a period of modernism, and nowadays topicality of this aesthetic phenomenon remains the same lively (2009: 135).

The essence of narrative itself, according to Fludernik, pertains to the sphere of unique human experience: “...narrative is not merely a sequence of events; rather such sequences are an integral part of human experience and this is why they feature prominently in stories. Action is, however, not absolutely necessary in order to construct a narrative.” (2009: 59) To designate this close connection between narration and a person’s inner world, the scholar offers special term *experientiality*,

meaning “the quasi-mimetic evocation of ‘real-life experience’” (2002: 9). Fludernik asserts that

... experientiality can be aligned with actantial frames, but it also correlates with the evocation of consciousness or with the representation of a speaker role. Experientiality, as everything else in narrative, reflects a cognitive schema of embodiedness that relates to human existence and human concerns. (2002: 9)

Conception of somebody else’s life experience is a semantic gap in narration, too, and experientiality gives a reader a way how to fill it. A reader can do this by correlating her/his own life experience with a protagonist’s (a character’s) one. Literary devices of the work of fiction help readers to do this in a way predesigned by an author, but there are other ways, too, and number of these variants is limitless.

David Herman also views aspect of identification with somebody’s experience as one of the most important criteria of narrativity defining. He applies to the conceptions by Thomas Nagel (1974), Joseph Levine (1983)¹ and T. Monika Fludernik. Key concept, Herman bases himself on, is *qualia*, a term used by scientists to refer to the idea of “what it is like” for someone to have a particular experience. “Qualia are felt, subjective properties of mental states, such as those I experience when I see the white color of my cat’s fur, or feel the bite of cold air on my face when I step outside on a winter evening,” (2009: 143) says the scholar. In his works he analyzes both how qualia form a basis for narrative and how narrative forms a basis for conscious experience itself.

An American researcher Lisa Zunshine actively develops in her literary and psychological investigations conception of *mind-reading*, “ability to interpret the behavior of people in terms of their underlying states of mind.” (2006: 7) It can be well considered in the context of involvement of ambiguity in interpretation of human mind.

At the beginning of her book “Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel” Zunshine puts a question about Peter Walsh, a protagonist of Virginia

¹ In particular, Herman uses Levine’s term *explanatory gap*, meaning difficulties of explanation of physical phenomena by means of psychic categories (1983).

Woolf's novel "Mrs. Dalloway": why are we so sure that his "trembling" during his visit to Clarissa Dalloway is a result of his feelings to her and is not developed due to, for example, Parkinson's disease? An answer is a human internal ability to understand it on the ground of previous emotional experience.

Zunshine notes that the *mind-reading* concept is used in cognitive studies "to describe our ability to explain people's behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires." (2006: 6) According to Zunshine, mind-reading ability can be used "as an evolved cognitive capacity enabling both our interaction with each other and our ability to make sense of fiction." (2006: 13)

The scholar closely connects phenomena of reader's interest and satisfaction with realization of mind-reading ability. She confesses: "I can say that I personally read fiction because it offers a pleasurable and intensive workout for my Theory of Mind." (2006: 164)

Generally, last time interest to emotional aspects of the interiorization process is notably growing within the scope of cognitive studies. Ideas of the above-considered studies are developed, for instance, in works by Uri Margolin (2007) Magdalena Rembowska-Pluciennik (2009), Tetiana Grebeniuk (2010), at alias.

Thus the ways of interaction of narrative material and reader's emotions, predispositions and moral conventions present a very productive branch of cognitive narratology.

6. Conclusion

Concerning Monika Fludernik, David Herman, Manfred Jahn, Lisa Zunshine's conceptions in narratology discourse arouses a methodological remark – there are doubts about belonging of psychic phenomena to the sphere of narrativity in general. A reconciling conception is proposed by the German narratologist Wolf Schmid who claims that all this mechanisms are viewed in the scopes of narratology due to actional nature of human consciousness that consists of its own events, has peculiar dynamic. He summarizes this idea in his phrase "Novel reading is mental event reading." (2014)

So the problem of ambiguity effect in narrative functioning in any case belongs to the most important problems of the cognitive narratology discourse. Main prospective trends in ambiguity studies remain: considering gaps as constituents of a possible world (furthermore, nowadays it is connected with studies of virtual reality); view of gaps as a means of forming of reader's interest, surprise and suspense effects; study of gaps as components of interiorization process during perception of protagonist's experience.

In contemporary humanities ambiguity is a very promising object of investigations, since these studies can show us ways of another's mind understanding, and consequently, can help authors to create new elaborated mechanisms of artistic influence upon readers.

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