

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 11 (1998)

Artikel: Reading the signs : the critical interpretation of texts
Autor: Widdowson, H.G.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99961>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 07.08.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Reading the Signs. The Critical Interpretation of Texts

H. G. Widdowson

The relationship between linguistics and literary studies has never been very cordial, alternating as it has between mutual distrust and open hostility. I do not want to go over its sad history, but rather to suggest, in the role of conciliatory go-between, that there are now, perhaps more than ever, grounds for a rapprochement.

The principal literary argument against the relevance of linguistics to literary studies is that which Graham Hough expresses in his little book on style and stylistics published nearly thirty years ago:

Great harm is done to fruitful collaboration between linguistics and literary studies by linguists who wish to foist on literature a whole battery of apparatus and a whole array of accomplishments that are quite irrelevant to its purpose. (Hough 104)

The reason why linguistics is irrelevant, according to Hough, is that its business is with the description of *langue*, the formal properties of the code, whereas literature constitutes "communicative acts, individual applications of the code," as he puts it; in short, literature is a kind of *parole*, or indeed, *performance*. Statements of this kind were dismissed by some linguists at that time as evidence of excessive conservatism and a Luddite denial of intellectual progress, but it is worth noting that in subsequent years there was a gradual recognition within linguistics itself that the literary critics were essentially right. The activity of formalist linguistics, engaged as it was with the analysis of language into abstract grammatical categories was indeed remote from the way language was actually used to communicative effect. And not only in literature but in all other uses of language as well.

So it is that over recent years, linguistics has extended its scope of enquiry beyond *langue* and into *parole*, to include not only the formal proper-

ties of language in the abstract, its traditional pre-occupation, but also the manner in which these are variously actualised in contexts of use for the expression of social identity and pragmatic meaning. Linguists, at least of a functional persuasion, are, in short, now concerned with language as performance, with discourse, spoken and written, and the interpretation of texts. To the extent that they are now concerned not just with how meaning is inscribed *in* language but with how language is used to *make* meaning, they make common cause with literary critics. The kind of texts they typically deal with might be different, but they are confronted with the same problematic task of inferring discourse from text by assigning significance to particular textual features. What can we, as second person readers, infer from a text about the first person writer who produced it? What counts as evidence of authorial identity or intent. How do we know whether, and to what extent, what we read into a text is warranted? These are puzzling questions which have preoccupied literary critics for a long time, and now confront the linguist as discourse analyst. Like what song the Sirens sang and what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, they are puzzling questions, but, as Sir Thomas Browne himself observed, they are not beyond all conjecture. And so, in this presentation, I want to propose a conjecture or two. In so doing I hope to suggest, in the spirit of this conference, that there is a good deal now, if there was not in 1969, that linguists and literary critics can talk about to their mutual advantage, and perhaps even as a basis for the "fruitful collaboration" that Graham Hough referred to. Of course, I shall probably end up by offending both parties.

There is one approach to the linguistic study of texts which, on the face of it at least, bears a very close resemblance to literary criticism, as its very name, critical discourse analysis, or critical linguistics, might suggest. The term *critical* here, however, is loaded. It is not just an adjectival derivation from *criticism* in the literary sense, but is meant to express commitment to a socio-political purpose. The analysis done in its name is directed at exposing the underlying ideology that texts insinuate into the reader's mind. It has, as they say, an agenda: it seeks to reveal the textual tactics that are used in hegemonic persuasion and the exercise of power. As the preface to a recent collection of readings has it:

Critical Discourse Analysis is essentially political in intent with its practitioners acting upon the world in order to transform it and thereby help create a world where people are not discriminated against because of sex, creed, age or social class. (Caldas-Coulthard and Coulthard xi)

An ambitious agenda, and not one that literary criticism would generally aspire to, or ascribe to. Nevertheless, there are points of comparison between the two activities, and what I want to do is to try to bring them out.

To begin with, although the term *critical* is used to mean something other than what literary critics might recognise, the approach to analysis itself has literary origins. This is acknowledged, if rather half-heartedly, by Roger Fowler who, as one of the pioneers of the approach, and also a person with literary credentials, can claim to speak with some authority on the matter. In discussing how it all began, he makes the following remarks:

It has to be said (and I hope this will not be regarded as a damaging admission) that our education and working context made us familiar with the hermeneutic side of literary criticism, and we, like the literary critics, were working on the interpretation of discourse – though equipped with a better tool-kit. (Fowler 4)

We will not (for the moment at least) go into why the acknowledgment of a debt to literary criticism might be counted as a damaging admission, nor why the tool-kit the critical linguists were equipped with was better, if it was anything like the “battery of apparatus” which Hough tells us was irrelevant. For the purposes of the present discussion, we need only to note the point about the hermeneutic pedigree of critical discourse analysis. Its procedures do indeed seem to bear a very close resemblance to those employed by literary critics, even though critical linguists seem generally unaware of the fact. The parallels between the two enterprises are striking. Both subject texts to close scrutiny and seek to identify nuances of meaning which are implicitly represented in the linguistic texture, over and above what is explicitly referred to. Both draw on the concept of genre and have an eye for intertextual echoes and allusions. Both assume a privileged authority to provide an exegesis and reveal to unenlightened readers covert significance which would otherwise escape them.

But it might be said that since they deal with different kinds of texts, the kind of significance revealed is correspondingly different in each case: sociopolitical on the one hand, aesthetic on the other. But what does this distinction actually amount to? What, one might ask, is the difference between, say, inferring an author’s philosophy from a work of fiction and inferring an author’s ideological bias from a factual report? And critical linguists are not alone in using texts to make moral judgements about social values. They are in good literary company. According to F. R. Leavis, for example, “a real literary interest is an interest in man, society and civilization, and its boundaries cannot be drawn” (Leavis 200). For Leavis, literary study was concerned

with sociological issues, and the critic had to be committed to moral causes. But for these issues to be plain, and this cause to be furthered, the sociologist needed to be trained in critical analysis:

What one has to suggest in general by way of urging on students of politics and society the claims of literary studies (I don't mean the ordinary academic kind) to be regarded as relevant and important is that thinking about political and social matters ought to be done by minds of some real literary education, and done in an intellectual climate informed by a vital literary culture. (Leavis 193)

Leavis, then, held that you could, and should, infer sociological significance from literary works, and indeed that this was the essential purpose of what he called (quoting Eliot) "the common pursuit of true judgment." And this pursuit is common to critical discourse analysts as well: except, one might say, that they are concerned, predominantly, with non-literary texts. But what is the difference? As far as Terry Eagleton is concerned, apparently, none whatever:

My own view is that it is most useful to see "literature" as a name which people give from time to time for different reasons to certain kinds of writing within a whole field of what Michel Foucault has called "discursive practices," and that if anything is to be an object of study it is this whole field of practices rather than just those sometimes obscurely labelled "literature." (Eagleton 205)

On this account, Leavis's literary studies, far from providing an intellectual qualification for sociological enquiry, have no independent status at all, but are themselves incorporated into the greater socio-political domain of enquiry. They have in effect been colonised. There is no literature as such, but only discursive practices: no aesthetics, only sociopolitical significance. Thus poetics and politics are compounded into the same study, one which, according to Carter & Simpson, "takes us beyond the traditional concern of stylistics with aesthetic values towards concern with the social and political ideologies encoded in texts" (Carter and Simpson 16).

If there is nothing distinctive about literary texts, then, literary criticism, the study of such texts, disappears, to be replaced by what Fowler calls "linguistic criticism" or others call critical linguistics. This is the application of literary critical techniques to the analysis of all texts, so-called "literary" (in inverted commas) or otherwise, with a view to tracing the sociopolitical ideologies which inform them. Just as Chomsky famously defined generative linguistics as a branch of psychology, so critical linguistics turns out to be a branch of sociology. Language in both cases is the epiphenomenon.

Those engaged in this textual analysis do not see the extension of literary critical techniques to all texts as in any way problematic. I want to argue that it is. I want to argue that the consequence is that all texts are actually treated as if they were literature, and that the analysis that results is valid as aesthetic but invalid as socio political interpretation. But I want also to argue that this does not invalidate the procedures of close textual analysis as such, quite the contrary, in fact, and that this is where linguistics can make a contribution to literary criticism.

My first move is to consider Eagleton's remark that literature is just a label that people stick on certain kinds of writing for some obscure reason or another. It is a name, not a concept, and what's in a name? But the point repeatedly made by sociolinguists, and not only those of critical linguistic persuasion, is that there is good deal in a name: that the way things are labelled marks sociopolitical values. They are not just randomly attached. So if people identify something as distinctive, it *is* distinctive. If they say what they speak is a distinct language, that defines it as a language; and there is no point in the linguist insisting that it is a dialect. By the same token, if people say that certain texts are literary, that defines them as such, no matter what literary theorists might say. And to identify certain writing as literary is to adopt a certain attitude to it and a certain way of reading it. So which way?

To begin with, if you read something as literature, you recognise that it does not have any direct referential connection with your concerns. The text is parenthetical and unpractical, and you are relieved of any obligation to take it seriously. It would not matter if you did not read it at all. Literature is an optional extra. It represents an alternative reality in parallel, which co-exists with that of the everyday world, corresponds with it to some degree, but does not combine with it. You do not have to act upon it, or incorporate it into the continuity of your social life, or make it coherent with conventional modes of thought. You do not have to worry about whether your interpretation corresponds with the author's communicative intention. You assume that the very existence of the text implies intentionality, some claim to significance, but you are free to assign whatever significance suits you. There is no possibility of checking out whether your understanding matches what the author meant, and no penalties for getting it wrong. In this respect, the literary text is in limbo: there is authorship but no ownership. As the French poet Paul Valéry observed: "There is no true meaning for a text. No author's authority. Whatever he may have wanted to say, he has written what he has written."

In literature, the text does not mediate between first and second person parties. It floats free in a state of vacant possession for readers to appropriate and inhabit. The reader engages *with* the text but cannot participate in interaction with the writer *through* the text. Literary analysis, therefore, is not concerned with what the writer meant by the text but what the text means, or might mean, to the reader. One might indeed hazard the proposition that what defines a literary text is that it is essentially vacuous, in the sense that it creates a vacuum for the reader to fill. Here, for example, is the beginning of Hemingway's story "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber":

It was lunch time and they were all sitting under the double green fly of the dining tent pretending that nothing had happened.

Here a scene is textually set, with time and place location linguistically specified. The definite article signals shared contextual knowledge, but there *is* no shared contextual knowledge. The pronoun *they* presupposes that we know who the referents are, but we don't: the specification leads to no identification. They are pretending that nothing had happened, and this presupposes something *had* happened, a previous event to which this text refers, and that we are in the know. But we are not in the know, and there is no previous event. In short, the text creates the illusion of contextual space, a referential vacuum which the reader is drawn into to give imaginative substance to. It is this being drawn into a different contextual reality, being absorbed into a different order of things that is, I think, the essence of aesthetic experience. In this way, readers make the literary text their own.

Let me offer you another example. It comes this time from a novel by the celebrated Indian writer R. K. Narayan entitled *The English Teacher*. Krishna, the hero, teaches at the Albert Mission College in the little town of Malgudi. He has a thick notebook in which he intends to write down the poetry he has ambitions to compose. But inspiration flags and he has only ten pages or so to show for his pains. His wife, Susila, mocks him:

"The trouble is I have not enough subjects to write on," I confessed. She drew herself up and asked: "Let me see if you can write about me."

"A beautiful idea," I cried. "Let me see you." I sat up very attentively and looked at her keenly and fixedly like an artist or a photographer viewing his subject. I said: "Just move a little to your left please. Turn your head right. Look at me straight here. That's right . . . Now I can write about you. Don't drop your lovely eyelashes so much. You make me forget my task. Ah, now, don't grin please. Very good, stay as you are and see how I write now, steady . . ."

Krishna then writes down in his notebook the following lines:

She was a phantom of delight
When first she gleamed upon my sight,
A lovely apparition sent
To be a moment's ornament.

and several more, thirty lines in all. His wife is most impressed.

"I never knew you could write so well."

"It is a pity that you should have underrated me so long; but now you know better. Keep it up," I said. "And if possible don't look at the pages, say roughly between 150 and 200 in the Golden Treasury. Because someone called Wordsworth has written similar poems."

Of course his wife looks through these pages and discovers that the poem is word for word a copy of one by Wordsworth. "Aren't you ashamed to copy?" she asks, and Krishna replies: "No. Mine is entirely different. He had written about someone entirely different from my subject."

One reason why Krishna can claim this is because the pronoun *she* that begins the poem is indeterminate, refers to nobody in particular, and so he can appropriate it to represent his wife. In conventional terms, third person pronouns are used as tokens of more complete references. *She* encodes the semantic features of singular and female. That is a linguistic fact. In normal circumstances it can therefore be used to refer to some single female person who does not have to be explicitly identified because the addressee knows who it is. The pronoun is pro somebody. But who is *this* she? There is nobody around for the pronoun to be pro for. There is no indication of identity in the poem. *She* is used like a proper noun, as if referring to some specific and unique identity, a named person: Barbara was a phantom of delight . . . or Jean, or Nicola, or any other *she* who delights you. But the use of the pronoun as a proper noun is most improper, because it presupposes specific reference when there is none. So a referential vacuum is created and readers can fill it with whatever identity they choose. And notice, in passing, that it is not only a matter of investing this pronoun with unique significance as a term of reference. Krishna pretends to be composing the poem from life, as if it were a verbal painting. His wife is sitting for her portrait. "Let me see if *you* can write about *me*," she says. "Let *me* see *you*," Krishna says. The poem is specific to this interaction and the pronoun in it therefore acts also as a term of address. Part of Susila's pleasure in the poem is that she takes it not just as referring to her but as *addressed* to her.

You were a phantom of delight
When first *you* gleamed upon my sight . . .

She is a third person pronoun which encodes singular and female. This is a linguistic fact. In the absence of anybody that it can refer to, the reader can invest it with any singular and female identity. This is a literary effect. So in a way Krishna is right. He makes the poem his own. The text may be Wordsworth's but it is a poem only because its meaning can be individually invested by other people. In performing the poem, they appropriate it.

She was a phantom of delight . . .

Who? Whoever you like. Barbara, Jean, Nicola, her and her, and you, and you too, Susila, Krishna might say: all women of all ages and from all ages, and at the same time none of them, a particular female and femininity in general at the same time.

The general point I want to make, then, is that the literary text does not mediate between first and second person parties as other texts do. And this means that the normal contract between parties which enables them to converge on agreed meaning is necessarily in abeyance. The philosopher Paul Grice refers to this contract as the *co-operative principle*, and identifies a set of maxims which language users assume to be in force in normal communication. One of these is what he calls the quality maxim: say what you believe to be the case. So you assume that if somebody tells you that he has won the national lottery, he is telling the truth and not setting out to deliberately deceive you. Other maxims come into play to regulate the amount of information interlocutors provide and its relevance to the communicative occasion, so the assumption is that they do not normally say more or less than is necessary and that what they say is relevant to the purpose. And that they do not express themselves in ways which are deliberately obscure – this relates to the fourth maxim of clarity. Grice is not suggesting that people are bound by these maxims and that every act of communication is true, clear and to the point. On the contrary, we often flout these maxims and say things which are false, obscure, and irrelevant. We quite commonly disregard the co-operative contract by design in order to achieve an effect of one kind or another – what Grice called an implicature. But we do this against the background of normal expectation, and the effect or implicature depends on recognising that the maxims have indeed been flouted. The fact that our communication does not always *conform* to the co-operative principle does not mean that it is not *in-*

formed by it. Without it, indeed, normal communication could hardly get off the ground at all.

But literature is not normal communication. We assume intentionality, but there is no way of assigning intentions. It makes no sense to ask whether the events are being presented as true, or according to normal expectations of economy or clarity of expression, or as relevant to what has been previously said or to the immediate context. We do not require of literature that it should be true, but only that it should carry conviction; we do not require of it that it should be relevant, but only that it should be consistent and coherent on its own terms and in its own terms. There is no point in trying to trace what is being referred to because the point of literature is that it does not refer to actual worlds but represents imaginary ones. Literary texts are not bound by the co-operative conditions of conventional communication because they are disconnected from the social contexts in which those conventions operate. They are of their nature untrue, uninformative, irrelevant and obscure. The maxims of quality, quantity, relation and manner are consistently denied, and consequently literary texts give rise to complex and unresolvable implicatures on a vast scale. It is this which constitutes their aesthetic effect.

But ordinarily, in the normal business of communication, the text *does* of course mediate between parties in the general social process, and the co-operative principle *does* come into play. Authors assume first person responsibility, mindful that they will be held accountable for the text, and that it can be referred back to them by the reader. In these (normal) circumstances it makes sense to look in the text for evidence of author intention, of how first and second person parties are positioned. And this is exactly what critical discourse analysis *does* indeed look for. The problem is that the textual data will always yield uncertain evidence, and you can only resolve the uncertainty by adopting a particular second person position. And so it is that a quest for author intention, covert or otherwise, will always lead you back to your own interpretation. Let me illustrate what I mean.

In Fairclough's *Language and Power* we are given a critical analysis of a short article in the newspaper *The Lancaster Guardian* with the headline QUARRY LOAD-SHEDDING PROBLEM. Fairclough sees the headline itself as loaded, as providing evidence that causality is being avoided so as to disguise responsibility for this state of affairs. He comments:

The grammatical form in which the headline is cast is that of *nominalization*: a process is expressed as a noun, as if it were an entity. One effect of this grammatical form is that crucial aspects of the process are left unspecified: in particu-

lar we don't know who or what is shedding loads or causing loads to be shed - causality is unspecified. (Fairclough 51)

There is no doubt about the data. The occurrence of nominalisation is a textual fact, and it is a grammatical fact that this form leaves aspects of the process unspecified. But it does not follow at all that the *effect* of this particular use is to conceal such specification. Although we might not know who or what is doing the shedding, the readers of *The Lancaster Guardian* probably do. In which case there is no concealment. And there is some textual evidence that they do know, for the lorries, we might notice are "*still* causing problems." This text therefore has contextual and/or intertextual connections: it apparently refers to something already familiar to the community, and/or something already brought up in the newspaper, and if this is so, then there would seem to be no reason to read an ulterior motive into its use here. Nominalisation is, after all, routinely used as a cohesive device, as is pronominalisation, in the interests of communicative economy: it serves not to establish reference but to maintain it, anaphorically, through second mention. Without it, texts would be clogged up with unnecessary information and so its use for this purpose is considerate of the second person reader. In short, referential *avoidance* is not the same as referential *evasion*.

So why then does Fairclough assume it as self-evident that the writer of the headline is being evasive? The answer must be that it suits him to do so: he has his own agenda. He is intent on using the text to expose the exercise of power behind the scenes. So he imposes his own interpretation by withholding co-operation. The effect he refers to is assigned on behalf of readers, but he does this by assuming a position of his own, not that of the readers for whom the article was designed. In so doing, he reads himself into the text just as Krishna reads himself into Wordsworth's poem.

The general point I am making here, and it is obvious enough, is that writers generally design texts on the assumption that the co-operative principle is in force, that people will process these texts in normal pragmatic ways, inferring meanings which have not been explicitly spelled out by reference to what they have already read, and what they know of the world.

And this includes, crucially, what they know of the communicative conventions operable in their communities. At this point, we return, briefly, to Fairclough's nominalised headline. One point about headlines, as a conventional text type, or genre if you will, is that the use of nominalisation is normal. This, again, is done more for reasons of communicative economy than anything else, to save on space (see Bell), but in this case the function is not anaphoric, but exophoric, referring to what the readers already know of the

situation, and cataphoric, referring in advance to the content of the article to come. It seems unlikely that journalists are everywhere seeking to suppress causality in some vast ideological conspiracy, though with Rupert Murdoch rampant, I suppose we can never be sure. But the point is that people reading this particular headline, as a headline, will expect it to take the form it does, and will naturally edit out of consideration any ulterior motive. In much the same way, if I were to receive a telegram (assuming that they still exist) which reads:

MISSED BUS ARRIVING KINGS CROSS TEN FIFTEEN ROBERT

I do not infer from this text that Robert is incompetent in English, or that he is indulging in some kind of comical pidginised use of the language, or taking up a position. I suppose that he is simply conforming to the accepted conventions for telegram writing. I do not therefore scrutinise the text for what it might mean other than what it most obviously signals. I do not, for example, notice the structural ambiguity and ponder on the possibility of the missed bus arriving at Kings Cross, or why Robert should have chosen to be ambiguous. And the same point can be made about the nominalisation in the headline: any potential significance the form might have for signalling ideological position is neutralised by its normality. But what if we were to accept the argument that there is deception here? We might then rewrite the headline in non-nominalised form to make the causality explicit. Something, perhaps, along these lines:

LORRIES SHED THEIR LOADS AND CAUSE PROBLEMS IN THE VILLAGE
BECAUSE THE MANAGEMENT DOES NOT PUT SHEETS OVER THEM

There are two points to be made here, I think. In the first place anybody reading this would not recognise it as a normal headline. Its very explicitness runs counter to convention: it provides more information than required for this particular purpose, and so creates an implicature. There is more to this than meets the eye. Paradoxically, the attempt to reveal covert meaning triggers off an assumption that there is concealment. This is not a headline. What is the writer getting at by presenting it as if it were? And the more narrowly explicit you try to be, the further you depart from the norm, the more sensitive the reader becomes to possible implicatures. Secondly, no matter how explicit you are, you are bound to leave something unsaid, and indeed the more you try to say it the more elusive it becomes because each attempt at

being explicit spawns more expressions which have to be made explicit, which in their turn set off more implicatures and so on. Lorries shed their loads: the simple present can denote either universal generalities or particular instances, so this expression can be taken as a general, indeed a generic statement about lorries: they always shed their loads and cause problems, it is of their nature to do so. And the use of the collective noun "management" is, we might suggest, significant: it has the effect of deflecting attention from the particular human beings responsible: they are hidden behind the undifferentiated and depersonalised abstraction. And so it could go on, *ad infinitum*. It is a game that anybody can play.

It is a pragmatic commonplace that meanings can never be precise but only approximate. Approximate to what? Approximate to purpose, as established by generic convention or as mutually agreed between those involved, and which they co-operate to achieve. Once you deny the co-operation, and the conventional limits within which it must operate, then there is no control at all on the possible proliferation of meanings. Once you deny the co-operation, you in effect convert the text you are considering into a literary one. For, as I have argued, the literary text is designed to be dissociated from context, and so to give rise to divergent interpretations. Here, there can be no co-operative engagement whereby the text is read as mediating between writer and reader. You may indeed read a sociopolitical significance into a story or a poem, but this is matter of your interpretation and you cannot use that as evidence of intention. Since a literary text floats free, you can appropriate it in any way you chose: you are not bound by the co-operative principle because there is nobody to co-operate with. You can perform the text by investing it with your own identity. And this, it seems to me, is what an aesthetic response means.

But does this then also mean that literary meaning is just a figment of the readers' imagination? Are there no textual constraints on interpretation? Although, as I have argued, the co-operative principle as formulated by Grice cannot apply, since it presupposes normal contextual connections, there is nevertheless a *linguistic* basis for consensus. And here we return to Graham Hough. One may accept that to study *langue* as such in dissociation from *parole* is an arid exercise in formalism, and not worth doing. But to study *parole* in dissociation from *langue* cannot be done at all. A literary text is *in* a particular language, which the writer assumes the reader will share, and this language consists of semantic encodings. Although Krishna can derive his own pragmatic *significance* from Wordsworth's text, thereby reading it as a poem, he does so as an extension of the semantic *signification* inscribed in

the words. He can invest the word *she* with his wife's identity, but only because she is a woman. One can take signification as a semantic variable and significance as the pragmatic value that is read into it. Now of course readers can perversely disregard the signification altogether and insist that they can read whatever significance they like into a literary text, thereby treating it as a cryptogram to be deciphered: *The ducks are swimming on the pond* means *The invasion will take place at dawn*. This is to take a Humpty Dumpty line, who, in *Alice Through the Looking Glass* asserts: "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less." It is this principle of the arbitrary assignment of meaning that lies behind his extravagant claim that he can "explain all the poems that ever were invented – and a good many that haven't been invented yet."

Literary texts, however, are not deciphered, they are interpreted; and interpretation must be semantically informed. But it is not, as we have seen, semantically determined. And here, I think, we come to the puzzling question I posed earlier on – the text analyst's equivalence of the song the Sirens sang –, namely: how do semantic variables get assigned particular pragmatic values. What text analysis should, I believe, be essentially concerned with is the extent to which particular interpretations are motivated by the linguistic features of the text: how signification gets projected into significance. It seems to me that it is the business of both critical linguistics and literary criticism to enquire into this question: not to provide a persuasive exegesis of a text, but to demonstrate how a text can give rise to a range of different interpretations. What they really need to be critical about is their own critical practice.

What distinguishes the two activities is the *kind* of interpretative conditions they are concerned with. As I suggested earlier, if people give the name literature to a certain kind of writing, then they will read it in a particular way, and this, I have proposed, essentially involves recognising that the text is contextually disconnected and so the co-operative principle is in abeyance. So whereas both activities must be centrally concerned with how meaning is variously derived from text by a process of pragmatic inference, critical linguistics has to show how this is done when the co-operative principle is in place, literary criticism when it is not.

An interesting, and somewhat paradoxical, consequence follows from this. The interpretation of conventional texts depends on using language to make a contextual connection, and once the connection is made the language has served its purpose. Communication normally works on a least effort principle and we pay attention to specific *textual* features only to the extent that they key us in to a relevant *contextual* reality. We do not usually ponder

on the specific wording of a sports report, a recipe, a letter from the bank to tease out what covert significance it might have: to do so would be to perversely defeat their communicative purpose. But this is precisely what we *do* do with literary texts. This is what they are designed for. Since they are cut off from context, we have no alternative but to create one from the textual evidence at our disposal. So it is of the nature of literary texts to draw attention to themselves just as it is of the nature of conventional texts not to. Literary texts incite us to ponder on the wording, and make play with the divergent interpretations it gives rise to; and such pondering cannot but make us aware of the indeterminate and unrealised resource for meaning that is inscribed in the language itself, in other words, in *langue*.

So in the interpretation of literary texts, we might say, *langue* comes into its own: not as an arid set of formal properties, but as a potential to be exploited for the making of meaning. In this sense, literary appreciation is a function of linguistic sensitivity. So, to return again to Graham Hough, literary study does not demonstrate the irrelevance of *langue* but exactly the opposite. But equally literary study is relevant to the understanding of *langue*, for linguistic sensitivity is also a function of literary appreciation. The two are bound in symbiotic relationship.

And so I believe should linguists and literary critics be, for here is the basis for the rapprochement that I referred to at the beginning of this paper. Linguists and literary scholars both apply their minds to the interpretation of texts under different co-operative conditions. To put the point intertextually, the marriage of such minds should admit of no impediment. It would lead, I think, to a consummation devoutly to be wished.

Works Cited

- Caldas-Coulthard, Carmen and Malcolm Coulthard, eds. *Texts and Practices*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Carter, R. and P. Simpson. *Language, Discourse and Literature*. London: Unwin Hyman, 1989.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983.
- Fairclough, Norman. *Language and Power*. London: Longman, 1989.
- Fowler, R. "On critical linguistics." *Texts and Practices*. Eds. Caldas-Coulthard & Coulthard, 1996. 3-14.

- Hough, Graham. *Style and Stylistics*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969.
- Grice, H. P. "Logic and conversation." *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts*. Eds. P. Cole and J. L. Morgan. New York: Academic Press, 1975. 113-127.
- Leavis, F.R. *The Common Pursuit*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962.