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978-0-521-40078-7 - Onomatopoeics: Theory of Language and Literature

Joseph F. Graham

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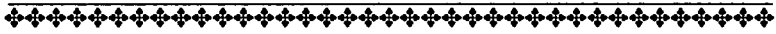
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The relations that words bear not only to the things they denote but also to the thoughts they express are once again the central focus of linguistic enquiry. This provocative book now examines the implications of those issues for literature and raises anew the question of the nature of literary representation. It reviews Plato's discussion in the *Cratylus* of how words actually represent things, either naturally or conventionally, and contrasts Saussure's sense of the almost complete arbitrariness of language with Chomsky's idea of the central innateness of grammar. The case against structural linguistics leads Graham's argument into semiotics and fundamental issues of meaning and intentionality. Currently plausible theories of how the mind represents the world distinguish clearly its verbal and visual modes and thus give answers for aesthetic questions as to the real validity of the traditional analogies between poetry and painting.

What then pertains directly to the study of literature from results in the study of mind is a general concept of exemplification which Graham elaborates as the common, though contested, truth in literary theory. Reviewing Wimsatt's notion of the verbal icon, Fish's concept of literature as self-consuming artefact and de Man's idea of allegories of reading, Graham shows these rival theories to be in fact complementary, and their philosophical differences immaterial to poetic questions about the function of language in literature. He concludes that the real answers lie not in epistemology, but in a psychology that explains how literature teaches and why humans learn best by example.

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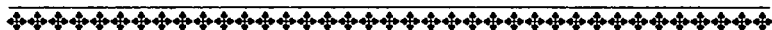
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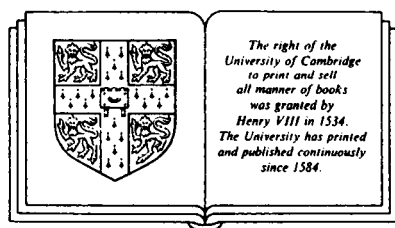
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# Onomatopoeics

Theory of language and literature



JOSEPH F. GRAHAM



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*For My Parents*

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## Preface



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The study of literature, whether theoretical or practical, historical or critical, often involves a study of language that is both specific and explicit. But even when language is not the object or the focus of study, ideas about the interpretation of literature still involve ideas about the nature of language. For something has to be assumed about the correlations of form and meaning that characterize the use of language in literature. And precisely because they are so essential, those assumptions emerge as an issue of debate when a practice of literary interpretation is subject to challenge. The recent history of literary criticism has been exemplary in that regard. Its turn to theory has mainly been a turn to language. And the broad course of discussion since New Criticism can be charted in language theory. That development now includes not only Structuralism and Post-Structuralism, but all modes of criticism where the role of the reader is decisive. Each and every one argues a case about literature from a premise about language.

Despite the dissension in the current debate over the theory of literature, there is a common yet crucial assumption about the nature of language. The traditional belief conceived language to be something like a substance. Its principles were thought to be simple rather than complex, uniform rather than differentiated, and manifest rather than hidden or theoretical. That same idea of language still prevails in the study of literature, though not in linguistics. It has been challenged by generative grammar, and routed if not completely defeated. The time has come to consider the consequences of that change in ideas about language for the study of literature. And the time is right for another reason: generative grammar has found a powerful complement in cognitive psychology. The benefit is great. Many of the basic consequences have been made more

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explicit as a result of the effort to find the right place for language in the structure of the human mind. The map of the mind that emerges from that double effort provides a context and suggests a set of hypotheses to be explored. It is now possible to ask about the place of something like literature in human psychology with reasonable hope for a plausible answer. There is at least an idea of the alternatives. The traditional task of defining what is specifically literary about literature becomes a matter of comparing modes of representation which have already been elaborated and rather plausibly corroborated as distinct capacities of the mind. And the aesthetic concern for a comparison among the arts returns as a feasible part of a credible psychology.

The project is both analytic and synoptic, comparative and contrastive. It can change thinking about literature by changing the configuration of ideas thought disparate. The solution to the puzzle is the pattern that fits the pieces together. Its warrant is a description that shows the connections. It has to describe the connections, and so has to be fairly abstract. It describes the pattern rather than the pieces, after all. The work takes a broadly philosophical turn as defined by a concern to establish how various things really hang together. These include language and literature, of course, but signs of all sorts, and pictures as well. The claim as to just how they fit together is strictly empirical. It is a claim as to what could be the case, which is advanced in the hope of promoting further inquiry and discussion. The book is thus a beginning, much like a beckoning. It seeks to spread the word about some important developments in the science of language and at the same time suggest what they imply for the study of literature.

Generative grammar opened a whole new field of inquiry for linguistics; it changed both the object and the method of study by shifting its focus from language to grammar. Language had long been conceived as something external and objective, like a series of utterances or a set of sentences. Grammar was its description, and thus derivative. The new perspective reversed that priority. Grammar became the real object of study. It represented our tacit knowledge of language, a mental capacity that mediated our verbal behavior. We could speak and under-

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stand a given language because we knew the rules of the grammar that paired sound and meaning for that language. A grammar and a language differed in several ways. Language included less than a grammar; it was but a sample of what the grammar made possible. And yet it contained more than just grammar. For language, like most complex human behavior, was an “interactive effect” whose structure was determined by various different factors. The grammar was not the only component of mind that shaped language.

Generative grammar soon received support from the cognitive psychology which sought to complete that first theory about our knowledge of language with an integrated study of its acquisition and use. The result was a theory of the mind as a modular system of mental representations whose basic structure is determined by our genetic endowment. It had to somehow explain the facts of a competence that is not only complex and abstract, but virtually unique. We know much more about sentences than what appears in utterances. And what we know is different, not only in substance but also in function. We learn it without any teaching; we use it without ever thinking. Thus it seemed quite plausible to assume that our knowledge of language formed a distinct faculty of mind which was programmed to develop and then to operate in a rather special way.

Vision was the only other system that seemed comparable to language. Yet their respective principles were very different. It is really no paradox that they appeared similar because they were unique. The relevant contrast is between those particular systems that are modular and fully dedicated, like grammar and vision, and those others that are central and fully generic, like memory and judgment. That primary difference marks the main articulation of our mental capacities. There still has to be communication on all sides, if only because we can easily describe and remember what we see. So that grammar, memory, and vision must either share a medium of representation, or have some means of translation from one to the other. There is at least one language of thought, and it cannot be the one that we eventually use for expression.

As a new theory about the structure of language, generative grammar has an obvious, if only limited, relevance for litera-

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ture. Both its syntax and phonology pertain to stylistics. And some has been applied in the analysis of specific texts. But as part of a general theory about the human mind, it has much wider and deeper significance. It offers a different set of considerations as well as a novel approach to some very old questions about the nature of literature. The implications for something like poetics have never been really pursued, yet there are good indications as to where to begin and how to proceed. The best guides are still the pioneers: Noam Chomsky and Jerry Fodor. For they give not only detailed, but also suggestive, accounts of the territory. They often suggest what lies around and well beyond their own work in the geography of the mind. To follow their example is to go mental and modular. That is, to consider literature as a product of the mind and then to compare it with others like language. That move requires a shift in focus from texts to the basic conditions of their production and interpretation. As it is for language so it is for literature, the actual is only a sample of the possible, and the same effect can have various different causes. Different utterances count as the same sentence if they satisfy conditions specified by the rules of grammar. An utterance can also satisfy other conditions on form and meaning – those logical, rhetorical, aesthetic or poetic. There is indeed far more to the description of language than grammar. And the rest is surely not the same.

In syntax and phonology, generative grammar has discovered the kinds of structures that implicate a very complex and highly articulated system of mental representations, and not just some general taxonomy. But in being so specific, the grammar provides a good point of comparison. It marks the contrast that reveals other systems to be different, certainly in content and probably in function. Hence if literature has a specific or characteristic mode for the correlation of form and meaning, it can be compared with the grammar to some precision. The structures as well as the system involved will most likely be different. Yet they will be psychological and only partial, so that such a theory of literary representation will not be a complete or truly general theory of literature. Literature is an effect of interaction among various determinants. And the way to explain such a complex result is to distinguish the

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effects of the various systems in play. Grammar is one, rhetoric another.

The study of generative grammar leads inquiry to a question about literature and then points in the direction of an answer. The sense of the question is to ask whether literary phenomena warrant the postulation of a special faculty of mind. Is there anything like a grammar or a specific competence? Or is it simply a matter of applying general skills to a particular domain? Here the primary evidence is an ability to interpret certain texts, and the theory gives an explanation of how it could be done. The question may not sound very familiar, but it is a version of the old question that asked about the nature of language rather than the place of grammar in literature. The difference is the shift in focus that redirects the original inquiry about words to their source in the human mind. But there is still good reason to begin with the old question. It is one that has always been asked about language and literature. Is it natural or is it conventional?

The answer that emerges from the recent developments in linguistics may seem less categorical and more qualified. It is certainly more circumspect yet no less definite. Claiming that language is natural or conventional really makes little sense without specifying in what respect and to what extent. And the same holds for literature, because they both involve more than just one system of constraints, more than just one set of principles. Questions about their acquisition and use are different, as are the questions of syntax and semantics, or those of grammar and rhetoric. Language is surely natural inasmuch as it is determined or shaped by human biology, but those effects could be quite varied in both type and extent. More distinctions and discriminations will always have to be made, when the real truth of the matter no longer seems that obvious or that simple. The most plausible answer has now to be appropriately qualified or properly situated, for it will only be plausible inasmuch as it is reasonably or relatively cognizant. To be pertinent is to be punctual, for there is a point of knowledge to be addressed. There is also a state of knowledge to be construed. This book does both, perforce.

It argues for a change in our thinking about literature as the result of a change in thinking about language. And it argues

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that literature is natural, though not in the same way as language. They have very different modes of operation and very different systems of representation, yet they both have their basis, and thus find their explanation, in the nature of human psychology. The case for their being distinct turns on the difference between modular and central processes of mind, along with a difference in semantics between description and depiction taken as an example of that between denotation and exemplification in general. Thus literature can be perfectly natural, even though central rather than modular, because it refers by reason of similarity. Such is the answer suggested by the recent work in cognitive psychology where linguistics has a bearing on the traditional concerns of both aesthetics and poetics by reason of their all being contributory to, and so presumably complementary in, a general theory of mind.

Both the evidence adduced and the argument advanced are limited, but then my real purpose is to persuade rather than to prove, just as it should be and only could be in treating matters empirical. My purpose is to persuade those who think about literature to change their ways. And my strategy is to give them reason to change their thinking about language, on the assumption that one implies the other, and with the hope that the one will induce the other. Hence the audience helps to explain, if not justify, the tenor of my argument. For mine is not the only case that could be made, and this is not the only book that could be written. To make the most convincing case for a change in our thinking about language would be to write a very different book – something in linguistics rather than aesthetics and poetics. But that has already been done, to my satisfaction at least. The opposition has been met and adequately checked, which is certainly not to say that every opponent has been convinced. But then certain truths are not easy for some to accept. There is strong resistance both old and new. There are still those like Quine, both Davidson and Dennett, whose resistance to realism for psychology may well provide solace for those who would also resist such a change in thinking about literature.

But that is hardly my concern, for this is not a survey of current opinions in the philosophy of mind, or a polemical piece within cognitive science. Nor is it written by someone

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else with wholly different convictions as to what is true, or plausible, or just relevant. And even though my full argument might seem stronger if some other objections were addressed, the case is made in the specific context of literary theory, where structuralism remains the dominant theory of language. The point is to show that such a theory could well be false, and then to elaborate the consequences of a different truth. As it stands the argument is clearly conditional: if *that* is true about language, *this* is probably true about literature. Yet the very thought of such an alternative has the force of dissent, given the present state of literary theory. The mere idea that language might be significantly different is bound to trouble the orthodox by posing a challenge to their basic dogma. You cannot change your mind without first a change of thought. But here is both hypothesis and evidence in regular alternation, shifting back and forth between if that were so and this is true, direct and indirect discourse, without any explicit remark to signal the change. It may be difficult to follow at times for some; it does make my point in more ways than one by providing an example of the mode it defends. The basic difference between theory and example hardly precludes the use of examples in support of a theory, especially in the realm of literature where example is the language of choice.

The piece first written by way of introduction to this book has since been published; it elaborates the question of nature or convention with reference to various positions in recent literary criticism, and it thereby complements this writing rather nicely. Joseph F. Graham, "Of Poetry and Names, Science and Things," in *The Current in Criticism*, Clayton Koelb and Virgil Lokke (eds.), Purdue University Press, 1987, pp. 123–138.



It may seem remiss that I have not observed strict formality to indicate the difference between use and mention. Yet I find my usage unambiguous in context, which has an advantage: it confirms my point about the ordinary inference of rhetorical force, and it conveys the silence of exemplification. But it does



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not mean that no rhetoric needs formality. I often have recourse to italics for emphasis – another form of exemplification.

It may also seem remiss and even ironic that I have not been more generous with examples. This is, after all, a book about the force of example. And that bothered me, until I asked myself what it really was that I wanted to exemplify in this book. The answer was in the writing itself. I wanted to be as serious and rigorous about literature as some others were about language. What I found ironic was the decline that came with the turn to language in the study of literature. It was a case of choosing the wrong example. There were notable differences in the study of language, not only differences in substance but also attendant differences in style, albeit a style of argument or a manner of reasoning. I have tried to present the best of both, describing the one, exemplifying the other, for a real lesson in the cognitive value of abstraction. A strong statement of principle is found in Noam Chomsky, *Essays on Form and Interpretation*, New York, 1977, p. 21.

I have been working at this project much longer than I would like to admit, yet I am happy to acknowledge the help and comfort that I have received over the years. It began with papers written in graduate school for William Wimsatt and René Wellek. There was then a long conversation with Jacques Ehrmann interrupted only by his death. My study of language led to MIT, where inquiry was the project of an entire community. Noam Chomsky, Jerry Fodor, Morris Halle, and Haj Ross gave me their time and shared their knowledge most generously. Such is the stuff of inspiration. Other memories of that sort include meetings with Radu and the regulars. Michael Sprinker has read it all carefully, corrected it judiciously, and encouraged it much more than just dutifully. Steve Arkin provided support in time of need. Talks with Steven Knapp and letters from David Gorman have prevented several mistakes. Catherine Gallagher and Martin Jay gave heartening advice. I am grateful to them all. My apologies to Paul who lived with the consequences of the work. And then there is Loretta. She had the confidence, insistence, and patience that made the ultimate difference. The accomplishment is hers as much as mine.