

Unveiling identity in Irish literature: A linguistic analysis of “Breakfast for Enrique”

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Abstract

The present work offers an analysis of a literary text from a discourse perspective. The text has been approached using concepts from the Systemic Functional Linguistics developed by M.A.K. Halliday (1985). We further base our analysis on Susan Eggins' classification of lexical relations (1994). The aim of this paper is to make a linguistic analysis of the short story “Breakfast for Enrique” by Irish writer Colum McCann, to uncover how the identity of its protagonist is built up. This is achieved by scrutinizing the author's lexical choices and by exploring how these acquire meaning within a given socio-cultural context. This article is part of a research project on Irish literature which is being carried out at the Departamento de Lenguas Extranjeras, Facultad de Ciencias Humanas, UNLPam.

Keywords: literature, discourse analysis, lexical cohesion, identity.

De cómo se devela la identidad en la literatura irlandesa: un análisis lingüístico de “Breakfast for Enrique”

Resumen

Este trabajo ofrece un análisis de un texto literario desde una perspectiva discursiva. Para llevar a cabo este análisis se utilizan conceptos tomados de la Lingüística Sistémica Funcional de M.A.K. Halliday (1985). El análisis también se sustenta con aportes de la clasificación de relaciones léxicas que propone Susan Eggins (1994). El objetivo de este trabajo es lograr un análisis lingüístico del cuento “Breakfast for Enrique” del autor irlandés Colum McCann, para develar cómo se construye la identidad de su protagonista. A tal efecto se estudian las elecciones léxicas del autor y se explora el significado de las mismas dentro de un contexto socio cultural. Este artículo forma parte de un proyecto de investigación sobre literatura irlandesa que se desarrolla en el Departamento de Lenguas Extranjeras, Facultad de Ciencias Humanas, UNLPam.

Palabras clave: literatura, análisis del discurso, cohesión léxica, identidad.

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Resumo

Este trabalho oferece a análise de um texto literário sob uma perspectiva discursiva. Para

levar a cabo esta análise se utilizam conceitos tomados da Lingüística Sistêmica Funcional de M.A.K. Halliday (1985). A análise também se sustenta com aportes da classificação de relações léxicas que propõe Susan Eggins (1994). O objetivo é atingir uma análise lingüística do conto “Breakfast for Enrique” do autor irlandês Colum McCann, para desvelar como se constrói a identidade de seu protagonista. Com tal finalidade, são estudadas as eleições léxicas do autor e é explorado o significado das mesmas em um contexto sócio-cultural.

Palavras chave: literatura, análise do discurso, coesão léxica, identidade.

Whenever people engage in different activities they establish diverse kinds of relationships and project different identities. One of the ways in which these identities are projected is by means of using the resources of language (Gee 2002: 13). This implies that when using language in a particular situation, people simultaneously build or rebuild their identity to fit that situation. This is the field of study of discourse analysis, which "examines how the use of language is influenced by relationships between participants as well as the effects the use of language has upon social identities and relations. It also considers how views of the world and identities are constructed through the use of discourse" (Paltridge 2006a: 2).

Following this argument, Brian Paltridge defines 'discourse analysis' as "an approach to the analysis of language that looks at patterns of language across texts as well as the social and cultural contexts in which the texts occur" (2006: 2 a). Hence the analysis of discourse focuses on knowledge about language which extends beyond the sentence – that is, it studies language at the level of the text. It allows us to explain why a text is built the way it is, and to discover how different identities are "enacted in and through language" (Gee 2002: 13).

Since we see literature as a form of social discourse, we believe that it can be analyzed from a discourse perspective. Thus, the aim of this paper is to make a linguistic-discursive analysis of the literary text "Breakfast for Enrique" by Irish writer Colum McCann to uncover how the identity of its protagonist is built up. With this goal in mind, we will scrutinize the author's lexical choices in order to explore how they acquire meaning within a given socio-cultural context. To achieve this purpose we approach the text from the perspective of the Systemic Functional Linguistics developed by M.A.K. Halliday (1985), basing our analysis on the classification of lexical relations offered by Susan Egins in *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics* (1994).

In Halliday's view a text is constructed by establishing semantic relationships within and beyond the clause. These relationships, which do not only depend on grammatical structure, are created by means of resources that constitute what is known as 'cohesion'. In English, cohesion is achieved by means of four main resources: reference, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion (pp. 287-288). For the purposes of this work, we will focus on lexical cohesion, which refers to the relationships between words with similar, related or different meanings, particularly in reference to content words and their interaction.

Halliday posits that lexical cohesion "may take the form of word repetition; or the choice of a word that is related in some way to a previous one –either semantically [...] or collocationally" (1985: 289). While a semantic relation points to the meaningful bonds created between words in a text, or between words and the social context in which the text occurs, collocation refers to the association of lexical items which tend to co-occur in language. Halliday further states that lexical cohesion "may be maintained

over long passages by the presence of keywords, words having special significance for the meaning of the particular text” (p. 289). Thus a text is constructed as an ongoing semantic process, of which lexical cohesion constitutes one aspect.

Lexical cohesion is relevant in the construction of a text because it is one of the resources that create ‘texture’. In Halliday and Hasan’s view, “cohesion is the set of meaning relations [...] that distinguishes text from ‘non-text’, and interrelates the substantive meanings of the text with each other” (1976: 26). It is the means whereby structurally unrelated items are linked together to construct a ‘semantic edifice’ in which these items depend on one another for their interpretation (pp. 26-27). Since texture can vary in a text, “textuality is not a matter of all or nothing” (1976: 296). Therefore a text may contain parts with dense clusters of cohesive ties which, by creating a very close texture, signal a strong interdependence among these elements. Alternatively, other parts may have fewer cohesive ties, giving a looser texture (p. 296).

In his short-story collection *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* (1995), Dublin-born novelist Colum McCann writes from various points of view, setting his stories in diverse landscapes. In an article published in *The New York Times*, the author states that he is “very interested in the lives of people on the outside, exiled in some way.” (1) He further explains that in the 1980’s an unstable economic situation and unemployment left entire towns in Ireland desolated from emigration and that many young people left the country in droves, mostly for America. In the story selected for our analysis, “Breakfast for Enrique”, the protagonist and narrator is an Irish exile, a young gay man living in San Francisco, who takes a morning off from work to tend for his ill lover. We may speculate that this young man is one of the economic migrants the author refers to in the quoted newspaper article.

Various allusions to Irishness help create the national identity of the protagonist. As Madan Sarup posits, national identity is constructed by appeals to myths, blood, native soil, homeland, national culture (1996:131). Culture is based upon communication since “it is through language that a group becomes aware of itself”, for which reason “language and place are inextricably interconnected” (p. 131). In the story under analysis, the first two references to the protagonist’s national identity appear in quotations by his fellow workers, who call him “*Paddy-boy*” (1995: 24) and “*O’Meara*” (p. 25). While ‘O’Meara’ is a traditional Irish surname, the use of the noun Paddy –defined as “*informal, sometimes derog* an Irishman (a short form of Patrick, a common name in Ireland) (2)– may suggest a discriminatory attitude towards the character due to his national origin. The next reference is voiced by an American shop assistant who calls him “The Wild Colonial Boy” (1995: 27), in clear allusion to the colonial status of Ireland with respect to the British Empire (3).

Other lexical items which contribute to create the picture of the protagonist’s cul-

tural background are "an Irish fivepenny" (1995: 26), "Irish kitchen", "Gay Byrne" –a famous Irish broadcaster, presenter of radio shows from the 1960's to the end of the century–; "UCC" –University College Cork (p. 28)–; and finally "shamrock" –a type of clover used as a national sign of Ireland (p. 32). All these lexical choices, interspersed throughout the story, contribute to the cohesion of the text while they simultaneously construct an aspect of the protagonist's identity: his national identity.

The lexical relations in a text can be captured by identifying lexical strings, that is, lexical items that occur sequentially in a text and which can be related to others through repetition, synonymy or collocation. As Halliday states, "what gives the text its coherence [...] is not simply the presence of such chains but their interaction one with another" (1985: 316). The semantic unity of a text is, therefore, attained by the bonds created among elements which, though structurally unrelated, have a mutual dependence for interpretation.

In *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics* (1994), Susan Eggins classifies lexical relations into taxonomic and expectancy relationships. In the first type –taxonomic– one lexical item relates to another through co-hyponymy (members of a superordinate class), class/subclass (superordinate /hyponym), contrast, similarity (including the subtypes synonymy and repetition), meronymy (whole/part) and co-meronymy (parts of a common whole). The second type of lexical relations –expectancy– may occur between a verbal element and a nominal element (an action and the typical doer or receiver of the action, an event and a typical location in which it takes place, and items that collocate with one another). The analysis of lexical strings can help identify topics or parts of them, or the kinds of relations –such as those mentioned above– that operate between items in strings (pp. 101-104).

At the moment the story takes place, the protagonist is working as a fish-gutter in a warehouse in San Francisco. His interest in fishermen and their bonds to the sea, as revealed in his introductory description, suggests a connection to his Irish roots. Ireland is recognised as an outstanding destination for fishing, since its geography and its climate favour a variety of species of fish in its rivers, lakes and the sea. This fact is made linguistically evident in the most important lexical string in the story. Elaborating on the topics of 'fishing' and the 'sea', this string frames the narrative, with the first and last paragraphs exhibiting a high frequency of lexical items that refer to different aspects of these topics, namely, places, activities, types of fish. Running through the whole story, and often interlocking with other lexical chains, this string sometimes displays a close texture and at other times, a looser texture. The following excerpt, the first paragraph of the short story, exemplifies close texture:

The only older men I know are the ones who rise early to work. They fish the ocean for, sea trout and haddock, flaring out their boats from the wharf before the sun, coming back

by mid-morning with huge white plastic barrels full of fish, ready for us to gut. They pull hard on untipped cigarettes and have big hands that run through mottled beards. Even the younger ones look old, the hair thinning, the eyes seaward. You can see them lurch, slow and gull-like, back to their boats when their catch has been weighed, stomping around in a mess of nets and ropes. They don't talk to the fish-gutters. They hand us a sort of guilt, a quiet disregard, I believe, for the thinness of our forearms. (p. 23)

As regards taxonomic relations in this excerpt –that is, how one lexical item is related to another– we find examples of co-hyponymy (sea trout/haddock), class/subclass (fish/sea trout and haddock), similarity (for the subtype synonymy: fish/catch, and for the subtype repetition: boats –repeated twice, sea/seaward) (4), co-meronymy (nets/ropes, which make up fishing equipment). With respect to expectancy relations –the predictable relationship between lexical items, usually related to collocation– we find cases of lexical relations between an action and the typical doer or receiver of the action (to gut/fish-gutters; fish-verb/fish-noun), and cases of relations between an event and the typical location in which it takes place (fish/ocean and boats/wharf) (5). The item 'gull-like' does not belong in any of Eggins' categories, but the author includes it to describe the fishermen's movements as they approach the boat by means of a figure of speech (simile) that alludes to a sea bird.

The main narrative line is closed by an embedded story about fishing, again displaying a close texture realized through taxonomic and expectancy relations. Below, we transcribe this story:

Enrique once told me a story about starfish. There was an oyster fisherman down the coast from Buenos Aires who farmed his own little area of the bay. He hadn't listened to the generations of fishermen that went before him, their advice, their tricks, their superstitions. All he knew was that starfish preyed on oysters. When they were dragged up in his nets he would take them and rip their pentasymmetrical bodies in two neat pieces. He would fling them over the side of the boat and continue fishing. [...] the starfish don't die when ripped, [...] He wondered why there were so many starfish and so few oysters left, until he was told by an old fisherman. From then on the fisherman left the starfish alone, although he could perhaps have taken them to shore and dumped them behind some big grey rock, or in a large silver dustbin on the pier where the children, on the way home from school, would fling them like stones. (p. 35)

As regards taxonomic relations we find examples of co-hyponymy (starfish/oyster), meronymy (coast/bay; nets –part of the fishing equipment), similarity (for the subtype synonymy: shore/coast; for the subtype repetition: starfish –five times, oyster/s –three times, fisherman/fishermen –four times). Concerning expectancy relations, we find lexical connections between action and doer of the action (farmed/ fisherman and fishing/fisherman), and between event and the location (farmed /bay and fishing/boat). Finally, we find a relationship of collocation. According to Halliday, collocation refers to a semantic relationship in which there is "a particular association between the items in ques-

tion –a tendency to co-occur" (1985: 312). We see this kind of relationship between the items 'pier' and 'coast/bay'.

The next lexical string that is important in the construction of the story is related to the topic of 'breakfast', which is anticipated in the title of the story "Breakfast for Enrique". Three paragraphs displaying a close texture in their semantic organization are transcribed below:

I move up and down the aisles, looking at prices, fingering the \$3.80 in my pocket. Coffee is out of the question, as are the croissants in the bakery case, which are a dollar a piece. An apple tart might do the trick however. Walking down the rows of food, other breakfasts come back to me – sausages and rashers fried in a suburban Irish kitchen with an exhaust fan sucking up the smoke, plastic glasses full of orange juice, cornflakes floating on milk, pieces of pudding in circles on chipped white plates, fried tomatoes and toast slobbered with butter. In the background Gay Byrne would talk on the radio, while my late mother draped herself over the stove with a patterned apron on, watching the steam rise from the kettle. (1995:28)

I reach for a small plastic jar of orange juice and a half-dozen eggs in the deli fridge, two oranges and a banana in the fruit stand, then tuck a loaf of French bread under my arm. There is butter and jam at home, perhaps some leftover teabags. (p. 28)

When scrambling eggs, I always make sure to add a little milk and whisk the fork around the bowl quickly so that none of the small stringy pieces of white will be left when they are cooked. The only disturbing thing about my mother's breakfasts were the long thin raw white pieces. The kitchen is small, with only room for one person to move. I lay the baguette on the counter and slice it, then daub butter on the inside. The oven takes a long time to heat. In the meantime I boil water for the tea and put some teabags in the sunflower-patterned mugs. (p. 31)

In the first two paragraphs the narrator's memories of his own childhood breakfast in Ireland are intermingled with the description of his shopping for products to prepare breakfast for Enrique. The last quoted paragraph concerns the actual preparation of breakfast.

The taxonomic lexical relations in these excerpts reveal cases of meronymy and comonymy: a. breakfasts/coffee, croissants, apple tart, sausages, rashers, orange juice, cornflakes, milk, pudding, fried tomatoes, toast, butter, eggs, oranges, banana, jam, French bread, baguette, tea; b. eggs/white; c. kitchen/stove; d. stove/oven; e. Deli shop/bakery case, fruit stand, deli fridge, rows of food, aisles. As regards similarity, we find cases of repetition, for example: a. tea/teabags; b. butter (three times); c. eggs (twice); d. oranges/orange juice (twice); e. kitchen (twice); f. milk (twice). There is also a case of synonymy: French bread/baguette. The last taxonomic relation in these excerpts is that of class/subclass: a. fruit/banana, oranges (the last two being co-hyponyms); and b. cooked/scrambling, whisk, boil, daub.

With respect to expectancy relations, we find related nominal and verbal elements.

For example, the elements ‘bowl’, ‘fork’, ‘kettle’, ‘glasses’, ‘apron’, ‘plates’, ‘mugs’ collocate with the verb ‘cooked’. Other collocations include: ‘slice of bread’, ‘loaf of French bread’, ‘scrambling eggs’ and ‘boil water’.

The two lexical strings previously analyzed interlock with two other strings relevant to the meaning of the story: a string related to ‘parts of the body’, and one associated with ‘disease’. The following excerpts are examples of how these lexical choices combine:

Enrique is curled into himself, the curve of his back full against the spindle of his legs. His hair is all about his face. Stubbled hairs in a riot on his chin. His eyes have collected black bags and his white t-shirt still has smatterings of spaghetti sauce from yesterday’s lunch. I move to brush my lips against his cheek. Enrique stirs a little and I notice a little necklace of blood spots on the pillow where he has been coughing. (p. 24)

Enrique is coughing in the bedroom behind me, spitting into the pillow. It sounds like the rasp of the seals along the coastline cliffs further up the California shore. His skin is sallow and tight around his jaw. The way he thrashes around in the bed reminds me of a baby corncrake I once took home after an oil slick in my hometown near Bantry Bay, continually battering its blackened wings against the cage to get out. (pp. 25-26)

In the first excerpt the choice of numerous co-meronyms that refer to parts of the body (back, legs, hair/s, face, chin, eyes, lips and cheek) is required to vividly describe the physical manifestation of disease on Enrique’s body. Therefore this string correlates with the one that makes reference to disease, where we find expectancy relations between ‘coughing’ and ‘blood spots’. In addition, the expression ‘black bags’ relates semantically with the previous ones to further support the devastating effects of his illness. Further on in the story (second excerpt) the narrator cataphorically recovers this topic by depicting Enrique’s skin as ‘sallow’ and ‘tight’. Finally, the description of his stained t-shirt (using the class/subclass relationship between ‘lunch’ and ‘spaghetti sauce’) points to his general state of decay, while simultaneously initiating the lexical string related to food. With different degrees of texture, these strings extend along the whole story.

The second excerpt ties with the first one through repetition. The last item of the first excerpt, ‘coughing’, re-appears five paragraphs ahead maintaining the semantic cohesion formerly established. In the second excerpt, the lexical strings of parts of the body (‘skin’ and ‘jaw’) and disease (‘coughing’ and ‘spitting’) continue and interlock with the lexical string that develops the motif of the sea along the story. Thus, a simile is used to describe Enrique’s cough, comparing it to “the rasp of the seals along the coastline cliffs” (p. 25). Furthermore, the verb ‘thrashes’ –typically used to describe fish trapped in a net– is adopted here to portray Enrique’s suffering and his wild movements in bed. In addition, these movements remind the narrator of an experience back home in Ireland when he looked after a bird which had suffered the consequences of an “oil slick in my hometown near Bantry Bay” (p. 26). This experience parallels his present situation in America, in which he is taking care of his ill lover.

"When asked about our identity, we start thinking about our life-story: we construct our identity at the same time as we *tell* our life-story" (Sarup 1996:15, our emphasis). This quotation clearly relates the process of construction of one's identity to the use of language. In this telling there emerges a variety of memories, experiences, stories, all of which are "little pieces of the jigsaw puzzle" (p. 16) which assemble to build up our identity. In "Breakfast for Enrique" McCann relates a series of events in a particular morning in the life of the main character. These events combine with memories of past experiences in various locations to create a composite picture.

From a linguistic-discursive point of view, one of the strategies used by the author to achieve this effect is to interlock different lexical strings to produce cohesion in the texture of the narrative. As Hasan states, unity of texture is one of the crucial attributes of text which is important in discourse analysis (in Paltridge 2006b:130). McCann's combination of lexical strings contributes to the flow of the text by semantically tying one to the others. Consequently, what a text does to convey meaning results not only from the way in which the various items are linked together but also from the references to elements external to the text.

The aim of this article has been to profit from the resources of text analysis offered by Halliday's Systemic Functional model by applying it to the study of a literary text. As we have already stated, the interpretation of a text is an ongoing process by means of which meaning is constructed. Our analysis has aimed at showing that lexical cohesion is a crucial part of this process. By deconstructing McCann's text we intended to unveil the intricate lexical relations that play a significant role in the meaning-making mechanism of language in order to illustrate how they work in a particular text. We believe that this kind of analysis helps to discover the tools the writer has used to create a particular impression on the readers. Further analysis of other linguistic aspects may contribute to enhance the results of this work.

Notes

- (1) "An Author Fishing for Souls of Irish Emigres" by Marjorie Kaufman, published November 10, 1996. <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html>, last accessed 24-10-08.
- (2) *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture* Longman Group UK Limited 1993.
- (3) This way of referring to O'Meara alludes to the fact that Ireland was one of the first victims of English expansion. According to Lois Tyson (1999), although Ireland "has long been an integral part of British culture", there is still disagreement as regards its postcolonial status. In fact, many postcolonial critics consider Irish poet W. B. Yeats "as emblematic of anti-colonialist nationalism" (p. 371).
- (4) Halliday states: "In order for a lexical item to be recognized as repeated it need not be in the same morphological shape" (p. 310). In this case, the adverb 'seaward' is a derivational variant of the noun sea.
- (5) The noun 'boats', although not an event in itself, is used in this text to refer to the process of leaving the wharf.

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