

## *Building Text World through Definiteness in Poetic Discourse*

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***Abstract:*** *The present paper deals with how definiteness contributes to the building up of a text world on the part of the reader. Ted Hughes's poem "The Jaguar" is the example taken to be analysed to prove the hypothesis that the contrast between definiteness and indefiniteness is related to the foregrounding process and the construction of text world. The paper falls into four sections: introduction, a theoretical account of definite articles, analysis of the poem and finally a conclusion.*

### **1. Introduction**

Definite articles are used to introduce referents that hearers or readers are usually expected to be able to identify uniquely on the basis of the co-textual, contextual or world knowledge that they share with the speaker or writer of the message. Definite expressions are, therefore, normally used to indicate the existence of a precise and recoverable match between the words of a text and some aspect of the relevant textual, situational, societal or cultural context, or of the world in general ( Quirk *et.al* , 1985: 265, 362).

The purpose of this paper is to examine if such definite expressions play an essential role in the building up, or rather implication, of contexts from texts. The paper attempts to approach poetic text worlds as discourse situations characterized by different types of voices and different types of relationships between speakers, hearers and settings. The emphasis is on definite articles that, as Leech (1969: 183) argues, "*are especially important for the "reconstruction" of situations*". The method of analysis is one that is common in linguistic studies of literary texts: the ways in which definite articles are used in a particular text are described and their implications for the situation of discourse that readers are likely to imagine are then studied.

The discussion draws upon influential accounts of the use of definite reference in ordinary language (especially Lyons, 1977 & Quirk *et.al*, 1985). It aims to build on the work that stylisticians have done on the poetic use of definite articles (e.g. Leech, 1969 & Fowler 1986). In particular, the validity of the claim that the occurrence of definite articles in poetry constitutes a deviation from ordinary language use is questioned. The study embodies a discussion of the use and effects of definite and indefinite articles in Ted Hughes's "The Jaguar".

## **2. Definite Articles: Meaning and Use**

The basic function of the definite article *the* is to indicate that the referent of the noun phrase in which it is included is identifiable within the contextual or general knowledge shared by addresser and addressee ( Leech, 1981: 167 & Quirk *et.al*, 1985: 265). Definiteness in English is marked by the definite article (the) in a noun phrase and is also present in the meanings of personal pronouns, deictic expressions and proper names (Leech, 1981:168). The definite article does not, however, contain in itself any indication as to how the relevant context or entity can be recovered: it signals identifiability without providing any guidance towards identification (Halliday and Hasan, 1976: 72). The knowledge which is required in order to successfully identify the reference can be of many different kinds, as shown by the examples below [these are collected from a number of sources]:

- (1) Can you pass me *the hammer* please?
- (2) Have you taken *the dog* out for a walk yet?
- (3) *The Vice-Chancellor* is having a reception for all new members of staff next week.
- (4) *The Prime Minister* will be giving a speech in Parliament tomorrow.
- (5) According to medical evidence, excessive exposure to *the sun* has potentially harmful effects for people's skins.
- (6) I wish I had never gone to Jill's party last week-end. *The party* was O.K., but when I left to go home I found that my car had been stolen.

- (7) Have you heard about Peter and Susan's wedding? Well, apparently *the minister* was late, *the best man* lost *the rings* and *the cake* tasted pretty awful. A complete disaster!
- (8) John and I haven't been to *the cinema* for ages.
- (9) *The man* who crashed into our new car is our next-door neighbour.
- (10) Do you know what time *the first post* is? I need to send this letter as soon as possible.

In examples (1) to (5) the referents of the definite expressions are uniquely identifiable on the basis of shared knowledge about different portions of extra-linguistic reality: the immediate visible situation in (1), the family or domestic set-up in (2), a specific institution in (3), a certain country or political system in (4) and the general 'planetary' environment in (5). Most accounts of the definite article draw a distinction between **immediate situation** uses, which include (1) and (2), and **larger situation** uses, which include (3), (4) and (5) (Quirk *et.al*, 1985: 266-67). As far as (5) is concerned, the definite reference to *the sun* can also be explained on the basis of the uniqueness of the referent, which also applies, for example, to cases like *the Pope*, *the earth*, *the universe*, and so on (Quirk *et.al* , 1985: 266-67 & Halliday, 1985: 293).

Examples (6) and (7) are instances of the **anaphoric use** of the definite article, which accounts for those cases where the definite referent has become part of shared knowledge as a result of some element of the previous text (Halliday and Hasan, 1976: 72 & Quirk *et.al* , 1985: 267). In cases like (6), where the head of the definite noun phrase (*party*) is identical to its antecedent, the notion of anaphoric reference is relatively straightforward: *the party* refers back to *Jill's party* in the previous sentence and is therefore uniquely identifiable within the current discourse. Example (7) is more problematic. On the one hand it is intuitively obvious to readers familiar with British-style church weddings that the referents of the noun phrases *the minister*, *the best man*, *the rings*, and *the cake* can be treated as part of shared knowledge on the basis of the previous mention of a specific wedding. On the other hand, however, the notion of anaphoric reference is not sufficient in itself to account for the appropriateness of the use of definite reference; rather, it needs to be

combined with an appeal to the addressee's general knowledge of the world, including the probable, or even necessary, presence of ministers, best men, rings and cakes within the relevant type of wedding celebrations. This particular use of definite reference, which is known as **indirect** or **associative anaphora**, is therefore usually explained by saying that the referents of the definite expressions have been indirectly introduced by means of a previous reference to some entity with which they are associated ( Quirk *et.al*, 1985 : 267-8).

Sentence (8) is an instance of what has been defined as the **sporadic** use of the definite article, where the following noun indicates some institution of human society which is instantiated by separate objects and events at different places and times. Other examples include references to *the theatre*, *the radio*, *the paper*, and so on (Quirk *et.al* , 1985: 269-70). Finally, in (9) and (10) the heads of the definite noun phrases (*man* and *post*) can be identified uniquely on the basis of information provided within the noun phrases themselves, namely by means of postmodification in (9) (*the man who crashed into our new car*) and of the logical meaning of the premodifier in (10) (*the first post*). Such instances are in some cases treated as separate uses of definite reference, i.e. the **cataphoric** use in (9) and the **logical** use in (10) (Quirk *et.al*, 1985: 268-270).

### **3. Definiteness in Ted Hughes's "The Jaguar"**

In this section "The Jaguar" by Ted Hughes is examined, where the alternation between definite and indefinite articles can be related to the status of referents within the text worlds. In this poem the contrast between definiteness and indefiniteness plays a crucial role in determining the status of referents within the zoo scene.

Let us first examine the example if some teacher asks one of his students 'How did the exam go?', his use of the definite noun phrase *the exam* indicates that he has a specific examination in mind and that he is confident that his addressee will have no difficulty understanding which particular exam he is talking about. The context within which the speaker expects the relevant referent to be uniquely identifiable may vary in nature and size: the examination the teacher is referring to may be the only one the student is taking that year, the one that relates to the course he teaches, the one that the student has just come out of, and so on. Rigorously speaking, such an explanation of the use of definite reference does not apply to some cases such as *the village* in Frost's poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening":

*Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.*

In these lines, readers cannot uniquely identify the referent of the noun phrase within the previous text or some extra-linguistic context. This 'unanchored' use of definite expressions, which is conventional in literary texts, is therefore often treated as deviant, and is usually associated with two major (and opposite) effects: the involvement of the readers within the evoked situation on the one hand, or their exclusion from the position of addressees of the poetic speaker's message on the other.. In this sense, unanchored definite expressions are important sources of inferences in text-world creation.

The value of definiteness leads readers to assume the existence of definite referents within the world they construct during the reading of a text, and to regard them as uniquely identifiable within that world. This leads to the conclusion that definite noun phrases like *the village* indicate aspects of the relevant text worlds that are familiar to the *persona* whose voice is presented in the poem, and, possibly, also to some addressee whose existence and identity are not explicitly revealed. On the contrary, if it is assumed that it is the reader who is being addressed by the voice speaking in the text, the occurrence of unanchored definite references can be interpreted as an indication of the involvement of the reader in a relationship of solidarity and intimacy with the fictional speaker and/or with the poet.

Apart from the noun phrase *tiger and lion* in line 4 "*Fatigued with indolence, tiger and lion*", where the coordinating structure allows the omission of the article (Quirk *et.al*, 1985: 255n), in the first two stanzas all the animals, people and objects composing the zoo setting are introduced as definite:

1. *The apes* in line 1 "*The apes yawn and adore their fleas in the sun*",
2. *The parrots* in line 2 "*The parrots shriek as if they were on fire, or strut*",
3. *the stroller with the nut* in line 3 "*Like cheap tarts to attract the stroller with the nut*",
4. *The boa-constrictor's coil* in line 5 "*Lie still as the sun. The boa-constrictor's coil*".

In the third stanza, however, the indefinite article is used in reference to the element of the scene that provides the topic of the poem, *a jaguar* in line 11 “*As a child at a dream, at a jaguar hurrying enraged*”; the habitation of this animal is also used with indefinite article, *a cage* in line 10 “*At a cage where the crowd stands, stares, mesmerized,*”, while other participants are still treated as definite, e.g. *the crowd* in the same line.

The function of the indefinite article is usually defined by linguists in negative terms: referents are introduced as indefinite if they are not uniquely identifiable within the contextual knowledge shared by addresser and addressee (Quirk *et.al*, 1985: 272). This is the case with the cottage mentioned in the example below:

- (13) On my way to town, I stopped to look at *a very nice Georgian cottage*.

The presupposition of existence and unique identifiability in context which is inbuilt in definite meaning does not therefore apply to indefinite reference, which is used to *assert* rather than presuppose the existence of referents within the relevant universe of discourse.

In “The Jaguar” the contrast between definite and indefinite referents does not seem to be satisfactorily captured by the notions of unique identifiability in context and of assumed familiarity to the poem’s speaker. Rather, the distribution of definite and indefinite articles seems to establish a difference in the *status* of referents within the evoked text world, which can be expressed in terms of the visual notions of foreground and background. Definite reference is used to introduce unmarked and relatively unimportant entities, forming the background of the scene. The indefinite article, on the other hand, is reserved for the main topic of the poem and the focus of the metaphoric profusion of the final stanzas (see Eco, 1990: 274 ff.).

This contrast can be attributed to the fact that the use of the indefinite article in the third stanza deviates from the pattern established in the first part of the poem, where all participants in the zoo scene were referred to by means of definite noun phrases. This results in the foregrounding of the jaguar among the other elements of the scene. However, it is also possible to account for this effect on the basis of the difference between definite and indefinite reference in relation to background knowledge.

According to Schank and Abelson (1977: 41), referents that have not been previously mentioned are normally introduced as definite if they are predictable or 'default' elements of a currently active schema. This implies that the definite first mention of a series of entities belonging to the same schema can function as a signal that the producer of the message has activated such a schema and that the addressee needs to do the same in order to interpret the text. Once a certain schema has been activated, indefinite reference is reserved for optional elements of that schema, or for entities that are not regarded as normally included in it (Du Bois, 1980: 238-239).

In 'The Jaguar' the definite introduction of *The apes*, *The parrots*, *the stroller with the nut*, and so on induces the reader to activate a ZOO schema and to interpret the definite expressions as indicating some of its default elements. According to Stockwell (2002:61), "definite subjects ... are generally preferred to indefinites". The use of indefinite reference, however, seems to ignore the status of the jaguar and its cage as predictable elements of the schema, and indicates that they are somehow perceived as surprising or novel by the fictional observer. The jaguar, in other words, is not presented as a predictable component of the evoked scene, but as the element that characterizes this particular realization of the ZOO schema and that makes it interesting and memorable (Eysenck and Keane, 1990: 280). The surprisingness of the jaguar's behaviour is conveyed by the long series of metaphors contained in the second half of the text: the jaguar of the poem does not behave like a tired and unnaturally quiet zoo animal, but has all the fierceness and power of a beast in the wild.

It may seem paradoxical that indefinite status should be attributed to the only referent of whose existence in the fictional situation readers are aware before the reading of the text, given that *The Jaguar* is the title of the poem. In fact the definite article is often used in titles to make a cataphoric reference to a central element of the text, where the same referent may, as is the case here, then be re-introduced as indefinite. It has been argued that this use of definiteness in titles is meant to provoke the readers' curiosity and to encourage them to read the text, in which the knowledge deficit that the definite reference has created will be satisfied (Weinreich, 1971).

According to Leech (1969:195), the “title” is important in specifying the situation within a poem and it provides clues to the interpretation of the poem. Hence, introducing a definite “title” in this poem of Ted Hughes supposes, among other things, that the reader already knows the “jaguar” and its “story”. It is a kind of an assumed identification provided by the poet.

Semino (1990: 13-16) suggests that definite reference in titles can also be explained in terms of the postulation of referents, as is the case with the use of the definite article in general. Definite titles, in other words, establish the existence and unique identifiability of their referents as a consequence of the presuppositional value of definiteness, and place such referents at the centre of attention because of their role as titles. In ‘The Jaguar’, therefore, the definite introduction of the jaguar in the title and its indefinite status in the text both help to produce the same effect, i.e. placing their referent in a foregrounded position within the poem’s text world.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The opposition between definite and indefinite reference does not simply affect the identifiability of referents, but has wider implications for the way in which they are positioned within the worlds that readers construct around texts. Moreover, The study highlights the fact that texts do not simply project contexts or worlds in a neutral way, but inevitably describe these contexts or worlds from a particular perspective. In “The Jaguar”, the perspective of the particular poetic speaker leads to the attribution of different amounts of importance to the elements included in the worlds of the text.

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**Appendix**

THE JAGUAR

Ted Hughes

- 1      The apes yawn and adore their fleas in the sun  
          The parrots shriek as if they were on fire, or strut  
          Like cheap tarts to attract the stroller with the nut.  
          Fatigued with indolence, tiger and lion
- 5      Lie still as the sun. The boa-constrictor's coil  
          Is a fossil. Cage after cage seems empty, or  
          Stinks of sleepers from the breathing straw.  
          It might be painted on a nursery wall.
- But who runs like the rest past these arrives
- 10     At a cage where the crowd stands, stares, mesmerized,  
          As a child at a dream, at a jaguar hurrying enraged  
          Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes
- On a short fierce fuse. Not in boredom—  
          The eye satisfied to be blind in fire,
- 15     By the bang of blood in the brain deaf the ear—  
          He spins from the bars, but there's no cage to him
- More that to the visionary his cell:  
          His stride is wilderness of freedom:  
          The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel.
- 20     Over the cage floor the horizons come.