

BARRETO, J. J.; FIALHO, O. C. Literary texts and happiness: a possible relation? An study on *foregrounding* and *flow* . *Revista Intercâmbio*, Volume XV. São Paulo: Lael/PUC-SP, ISSN 1806-275x, 2006.

LITERARY TEXTS
AND HAPPINESS: A POSSIBLE RELATION?
AN STUDY ON FOREGROUNDING AND FLOW

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ABSTRACT: This study aims at investigating the positive feelings one may feel while reading a literary text. The theory of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1989; 1990) is used to this purpose, as well as texts in different levels of foregrounding. This study measures the affect students have while reading literary texts.

KEYWORDS: foregrounding; flow; literary texts; happiness; readers

0. Introduction

The presence of “negative” feelings in the reading of literary texts has been widely investigated. The same does not occur with “positive” feelings. The aim of this research is to investigate the relation between these texts and the happiness one may feel while reading them.

The question is: how would it be possible to make such a relation?

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1989; 1990), *flow* is the state where one finds concentration and happiness while performing a challenging activity that he or she is capable of. Based on this theory and using the variables that are involved in it, this study was developed by investigating the presence of *flow* in the reading of a literary text.

In order to study *flow* in literary texts, we relate it to *foregrounding*. The latter is described as the phenomenon which occurs when perception is de-automatized. To this purpose, we attribute some variants associated to *flow* with *foregrounding*: *Foregrounding* would be the challenge of the reading activity and while reading this text, one would feel secure and happy, that is, reach the state of *flow*.

1. Theoretical background

1.1. *Flow* theory

To build a solid ground to investigate the presence of happiness one may feel while reading a text, we used a concept that is called *flow*. This concept was developed, among others, by Csikszentmihalyi (1989; 1990).

The variables considered essential for a person to reach the state of *flow*, according to the author previously mentioned, are: challenge - one may feel challenged because when achieving his or her goals, he or she will be in state of *flow*; concentration - in the act of performing the activity, a person must concentrate in the activity to feel secure and perform it well; ability - due to the fact that if the person does not have the ability to pass through the challenges the activity provides, he or she will feel boredom instead of happiness.

As a complement to the theoretical background of our study, we also used an article by Novak, Hoffman & Yung (1998), that gives us a model of an empirical study involving many variables of the *flow*. These are: importance, control, excitement, concentration, playful aspect, time distortion, positive affect and exploratory behavior. These variables are directly involved to the ones of Csikszentmihalyi – challenge, concentration, ability, pleasure.

1.2. *Foregrounding* theory

The notion of *foregrounding* has its origins in the work of the Russian Formalists, especially in the one by Šklovskij¹ (1917). The author sees art as a process and not as an object in itself. Its function is to get to know the sensation of the objects and to make people aware of the world in a fresh way. The device whereby this is achieved is “defamiliarization” or “making strange” (Russian ‘*ostranenie*’). According to him, art deautomatizes our perceptions by making the forms difficult, “unfamiliar”, increasing the length of perception and emphasising the new meanings and the emotional effects of the forms. The process of perception has, then, an aesthetic end in itself:

And art exists so that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are

known. (...) [It] is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.¹ (1965: 12 [1917]).

The notion that the essence of poeticality lies in the deformation of the language, in the violation of its rules was then developed by the Prague Structuralists. The term *foregrounding* was introduced into the study of literature in the West by Garvin (1964), as a translation of the czech '*aktualisace*', employed in the work of several of these scholars. The most influential figure in shaping the concept has been the Prague scholar Jan Mukařovský (1964 [1932]). For him, poetic language is not defined in terms of its properties, but in terms of its function, which lies in its aesthetic effect. Such aesthetic effect results from the fact that attention is concentrated on the linguistic sign itself, and not, as in ordinary language, on the communicative result. The notion of *foregrounding* is, then, employed to distinguish literature from non-literary uses of language. As Mukařovský pointed out, *foregrounding* may occur not only in poetic language but also in everyday language, where it is sporadically and lacks systematic design. In poetic language, on the other hand, it is structured, tends to be systematic and hierarchical. If, in everyday language, the focus is in communication, in literary language, the focus lies in the disruption of such everyday communication:

Foregrounding is the opposite of automatization, that is, the deautomatization of an act; the more an act is automatized, the less it is consciously executed; the more it is foregrounded, the more completely conscious does it become. Objectively speaking: automatization schematises an event; *foregrounding* means the violation of the scheme. (1964: 19 [1932])

In poetic language, communication becomes secondary and *foregrounding* enables literature to present new meanings with an intricacy and complexity that ordinary language does not allow (cf. Mukařovský, 1977).

At the same time the notion of *foregrounding* was being discussed by the Formalists, in Moscow, in 1916, Roman Jakobson points at another important aspect: the notion of parallelism. *Foregrounding* may, then, occur not only by means of deviation from norms but also by the reoccurrence of similar features, such as a pattern of assonance or a related group of metaphors (cf. Miall & Kuiken, 1994), and one set of

features will dominate the others (Mukařovský, 1964: 20), a phenomenon that Jakobson termed “the dominant”(1987: 41-46).

As summed up by Simpson (2004), the notion has, then, the following definition:

Foregrounding refers to a form of textual patterning which is motivated specifically for literary-aesthetic purposes. (...) FG typically involves a stylistic distortion of some sort, either through an aspect of the text which deviates from a linguistic norm or, alternatively, where an aspect of the text is brought to the fore through repetition or parallelism. (p. 50)

Foregrounding has, then, a linguistic perspective and is realised mainly by means of two stylistic devices: deviation and parallelism. It is a pragmatic concept that refers to the interaction of author, literary text and reader. The material presence of devices of *foregrounding* leads the readers in their textual interpretation and satisfies their aesthetic needs.

In the 1980's the theory started being tested empirically. Van Peer (1986) systematized the theory and found to relate responses to *foregrounding* in poetry to qualities as strikingness, importance and discussion value. Miall & Kuiken (1994), studying readers' response to short stories and working on the emotional effects of *foregrounding* structures, confirm Van Peer (1986)'s previous observations and add that *foregrounding* is related to reading time and affect. According to these authors, such effects are independent of literary competence or interest. However, it is not know whether *foregrounding* is related to *flow*. This is the object of investigation of the present study, which aims at contributing to a better understanding of the linguistic aspect of the theory.

1.3. *Flow + Foregrounding* theory

We could notice that *flow* and *foregrounding* can be related considering the characteristics that involve these two theories. *Foregrounding* can be faced as the challenge one may encounter while reading a literary text, that is, while overcoming this challenge, the person will be experiencing the state of flow. We can also notice that affect, related to the *foregrounding*, can be similar to ability, a *flow* variable, in terms of a person's proximity with the text given to him or her. Taking these relations into consideration, this study was developed to test if there is a possible relation between *flow* and *foregrounding*.

2. Methodology

2.1. Selection of material

Six different texts on the same subject were selected, all of them on the theme of love: two “canonical literary” texts, two “non-canonical literary” texts and two “non-literary” texts. They contained about 715 words so that they were not long texts and could be used in a single session of under half an hour.

Five independent judges, two literature professors and three graduate students from a public university in Rio de Janeiro analysed the segments of the stories for the presence of foregrounded features at the phonetic, grammatical and semantic levels. They also judged the literary quality of each text using their own criteria and responding to a 5-point scale. The frequency of *foregrounding* within a segment was used as an index for the complexity of such structures. The selected texts were “*Substância*” by Guimarães Rosa (“canonical literary” text), the one with a larger array of *foregrounding* features at all levels, also considered the most literary one by the judges; a fragment of “*Sabrina*” (“non-canonical literary” text), a popular romance and the one with some array of *foregrounding* features; and a chapter of *Amor Incondicional e Perdão* by Edith Stauffer, a self-help book (“non-literary” text), the one with hardly any *foregrounding* features, also considered the least literary one by the judges.

2.2. The participants

Participants were 45 undergraduate students from the course of Letters at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Fifteen students read the literary text with much *foregrounding*, fifteen read the extract of the popular romance with medium *foregrounding* and fifteen read the non-literary text with few *foregrounding* features.

2.3. The instrument

After reading the text in fragments and in the computer screen, the participants answered a questionnaire with ten sentences that involved the *flow* variables. The variables analyzed were the ones presented in the Novak, Hoffman & Yung’s article. After the sentence, the participant marked a number in the Likert scale, to measure his or her agreement with the sentence.

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This is the questionnaire used in the research:						
1. While reading the text I could concentrate myself easily.						
Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Disagree
2. This text was a challenge for me.						
Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Disagree
3. I was able to overcome the challenges this text presented.						
Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Disagree
4. This text was stimulating.						
Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Disagree
5. I was in the control of the situation while reading the text.						
Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Disagree
6. I felt pleasure while reading the text.						
Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Disagree
7. I lost the time notion while reading the text.						
Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Disagree
8. This text was important to me.						
Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Disagree
9. This text made me feel happy.						
Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Disagree
10. I was satisfied after reading the text.						
Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Disagree

3. Data analysis

The data collected was submitted to the statistics program SPSS for Windows, version 11. The One-Way ANOVA test was considered the most appropriate one because the variables were at the interval level of measurement. It checks whether there are differences in terms of men within the populations studied. The three groups reading the three different texts were compared and analyzed using the multiple comparisons; Post-Hoc Test with Bonferroni was used to identify where these differences occur. The p-value was set at the conventional level of 0.05; p-values lower than 0.10 were considered a tendency.

4. Results

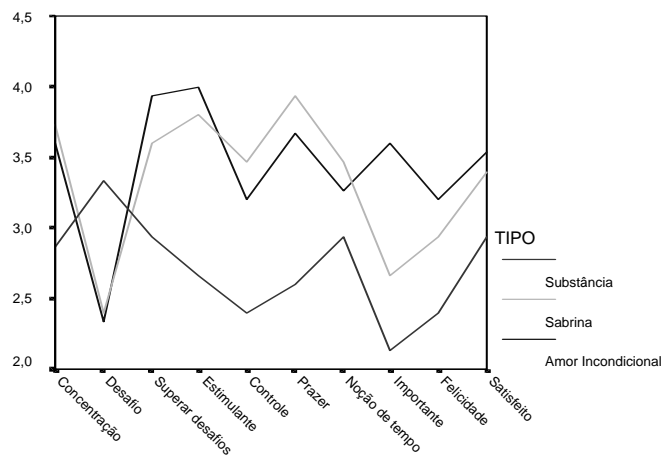
4.1. The One-way ANOVA test results

The ANOVA table shows that there is a significant difference among the answers to the three texts, concerning the variables concentration, challenge, overcoming the challenge, stimulus, control over the situation, pleasure and importance.

<i>Flow categories</i>		<i>Sum of squares</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Concentration	Between Groups	6,533	2	3,267	3,407	,043
	Within Groups	40,267	42	,959		
	Total	46,800	44			
Challenge	Between Groups	9,378	2	4,689	3,268	,048
	Within Groups	60,267	42	1,435		
	Total	69,644	44			
Overcoming the challenge	Between Groups	7,778	2	3,889	4,139	,023
	Within Groups	39,467	42	,940		
	Total	47,244	44			
Stimulus	Between Groups	15,511	2	7,756	5,453	,008
	Within Groups	59,733	42	1,422		
	Total	75,244	44			
Control over the situation	Between Groups	9,244	2	4,622	4,067	,024
	Within Groups	47,733	42	1,137		
	Total	56,978	44			
Pleasure	Between Groups	14,933	2	7,467	6,046	,005
	Within Groups	51,867	42	1,235		
	Total	66,800	44			
Time notion	Between Groups	2,178	2	1,089	,605	,551
	Within Groups	75,600	42	1,800		
	Total	77,778	44			
Importance	Between Groups	16,533	2	8,267	6,853	,003
	Within Groups	50,667	42	1,206		
	Total	67,200	44			
Happy	Between Groups	4,978	2	2,489	2,136	,131
	Within Groups	48,933	42	1,165		
	Total	53,911	44			
Satisfied	Between Groups	2,978	2	1,489	1,152	,326
	Within Groups	54,267	42	1,292		
	Total	57,244	44			

4.2. The Bonferroni test results

The test with multiple comparisons – Bonferroni – showed significant differences between the variables mentioned before. This graphic shows these variant differences among the three texts.



flow while reading a literary text. This type of text is considered a challenge, a hard task for them to perform that they do not experience pleasure as they are not able to overcome the difficulties they face. This study seems to confirm previous ones realized by the REDES group – Fialho & Zyngier, 2003; Zyngier & Shepherd, 2003; Mendes & Zyngier, 2002; Carvalho, 2001, indicating once again that students do not have a positive response towards literary texts and tend to build an emotional and critical distance towards them.

6. Further studies

It would be interesting to replicate this study with other populations and to replicate it using another literary text to check whether the patterns here observe still reoccur. It would be also interesting to verify whether there is any difference in terms of readers' reactions after reading the whole text on the paper instead of reading segments on the screen.

NOTAS

¹ Šklovskij in Lemon & Reis (1965: 12)

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