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Armenian Folia Anglistika is intended to be published twice a year. Articles of interest to university-level teachers and scholars in English Studies are warmly welcomed by the multi-national Editorial Board of the Journal. Articles should be directed to the Editor-in-Chief.

In 2007 the Editorial Board of *Armenian Folia Anglistika* announced the opening of a new section in the Journal – Armenological Studies, which invites valuable and innovative contributions from such fields as Armenian Linguistics, Literary Criticism, Ethnic Studies, Cultural History, Gender Studies and a wide range of adjacent disciplines.

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Լրատվական գործունեություն
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**«ԱՆԳԼԵՐԵՆԻ ՈՒՍՈՒՄՆԱՍԻՐՈՒԹՅԱՆ
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http:www.aase.yasu.am

Վկայական՝ 03Ա 065183
Տրված՝ 28.06.2004թ.

Computer Design:
Heghine Gasparyan

**Yerevan State University
Press**

Երևանի պետական համալսարան

**Անգլերենի ուսումնասիրության հայկական
ասոցիացիա (Անգլերենի ուսումնասիրության
եվրոպական ֆեդերացիայի անդամ)**

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**Միջազգային գրախոսվող ամսագիր
համագործակցությամբ`**

Երևանի պետական լեզվահասարակագիտական համալսարանի
(Հայաստան)

Մոսկվայի Մ.Լոմոնոսովի անվ. պետական համալսարանի
(Ռուսաստան)

Կրակովի Յագիելոնյան համալսարանի
(Լեհաստան)

Բերգամոյի համալսարանի
(Իտալիա)

Մոնտենեգրոյի համալսարանի

ԵՐԵՎԱՆ - 2018



Yerevan State University



**Armenian Association for the Study
of English (Member Association of the
European Society for the Study of English)**

ARMENIAN FOLIA ANGLISTIKA

**Reviewed International Journal
in cooperation with:**

Yerevan State University of
Languages and Social Sciences, Armenia

Moscow Lomonosov State University, Russia

Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland

University of Bergamo, Italy

University of Montenegro

YEREVAN- 2018

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Concerning the Program of Understanding a Literary Text

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Abstract

Text is a broad notion. It may be expressed both in writing and orally in the form of a monologue, dialogue, utterance, etc. This may well be the reason for the persistent interest towards text as such. The great variety of studies on the nature of text and its objectives, however, are all somewhat controversial and lack a unified conceptual approach. Things get even more complicated due to the fact that now into scientific circulation has been introduced the notion of *discourse*, and evidently of considerable popularity in the current stage of the development of linguistics is the relationship between text and discourse.

The present article focuses on the study of the correlation of text and discourse, views literary text as a unit of specific communication between the writer and the reader, as well as centers the attention on the consecutive stages of literary text perception and understanding.

Key words: *author, reader, communicative intention of speech making, literary communication process, the influence of external factors, a combination of linguistic and extralinguistic knowledge, multiplicity of text perception, the program of understanding text.*

Introduction

The diversity of investigations on text is often controversial and lacks a unified standpoint. This might be one of the reasons why the study of text never ceases to be topical.

Text is rather a broad notion covering both the written and oral forms of speech which can be actualized as a monologue, a dialogue, an utterance at

large. Today the situation becomes even more complicated because the notion of *discourse* (*խոսակցութիւն* in Armenian) has occurred in the domain of science and is being very actively circulated. Whether the Armenian translation of the term *discourse* (*խոսակցութիւն*) is justified and appropriately conveys the essence of the notion *discourse* is a question of a separate discussion. However obvious is the fact that the problem of *text* – *discourse* correlation is rather topical at the present stage of linguistic research. The thing is that these two notions are very often used without any clearcut differentiation, except that a piece of written speech is defined as text, whereas oral speech is identified as discourse (Karasik 2002; Levitskiy 2006). It should be mentioned however that this differentiation based on the statement of *oral speech/written speech* dichotomy can by no means be justified as both text and discourse can be expressed both orally and in written form. Indeed, there is also the approach according to which discourse has two forms of expression – *written* and *oral* (Gasparyan 2010), however this distinction has also given rise to various opinions and discussions. Some linguists are doubtful about what recorded simultaneous text is – an oral text or discourse. (Cf. Crystal, Davy 1979), though according to E. Ochs, oral speech is distinguished with the proportionality of phonemes, words and syntax and the lack of syntagms that make the speech coherent. Oral speech acquires a seemingly unfinished nature as it mostly contains unfinished sentences and word-syntagms (Ochs 1979). On the other hand, the use of certain features, typical of oral speech cannot be fully excluded in the written text. Very often authors turn to reduced or elliptical utterances, lexical units and to the description of the phonetic and intonational features of the characters to make the language of a literary text more living and actual. Thus, it is not a surprise that Evelyn Hatch suggests using the terms *pre-planned speech* and *spontaneous speech* instead of *written* and *oral* (Hatch 1992).

It is an established fact that the cohesion of speech is one of the most important pre-conditions to achieve the understanding of a text. And if the text-forming units are uttered successively but are not cohesive, the string of words is unable to convey a complete sense and be understood by the reader or the listener. Whereas when utterances created in the process of speech

formation cohere semantically and structurally, and their correlations do not contradict the logics of communication or do not distort the natural process of realizing the communicative intention proper, then, as van Dijk states, we deal with discourse. Van Dijk defines *discourse* as the uttered text, and *text* as the abstract grammatical structure of the uttered. Proceeding from the Sossurian distinction of language and speech he qualifies *discourse* as a unit of speech and *text* as a means of materializing the language system (van Dijk 1982).

The brief examination of various approaches to the correlation of text and discourse shows that discourse is widely referred to not only in linguistic but also other scientific spheres, particularly in psychology, philosophy, political studies and other social sciences. However, whatever the case, it is generalized as an efficient way to reproduce the reality, particularly in the process of speech formation and, in fact, demonstrates speech processes from a social, psychological and cultural standpoint, emerging in certain communicative situations in terms of the intention of the speaker and the attitude of the listener (Gasparyan 2010). Moreover, the experience, the knowledge, the ability of both parties to perceive, understand and reproduce the reality is of paramount significance. It is not accidental that, for example, N.D. Arutyunova defines discourse as a piece of speech immersed in the vortex of life and is convinced that discourse is the coherent text with all its linguistic and extra-linguistic factors (cultural, psychological, functional, etc.), i.e. the text with its situational concepts (Arutyunova 1990). There are also others who believe that discourse is the process of pronouncing, recording, interpreting the speech in its entirety (Brown, Yule 1983).

Thus, if we try to formulate the notion of discourse broadly we shall say that, in real fact, it is communication between the addresser (author) and the addressee (reader or the listener), viewed through the interrelation of their mental, cultural, social and linguistic features.

When we turn to questions related to the problem of perception, understanding and interpretation of texts we can easily notice that they have nowadays undergone certain changes appearing in the limelight of linguistic research. These changes occurred after the communicative approach came to

replace the structural one and when man with his emotions and feelings, his unique worldview and national and linguo-cultural characteristics obtained special significance and came to occupy a special place in the sphere of linguistic research. Perhaps this came to explain the interest of linguistics towards the art of hermeneutics, and the problems of the poetic understanding and interpretation of a text (particularly a literary text) were soon ranked among the more actual problems of scientific cognition.

Literary Text as Communication between the Writer and the Reader

What has been presented above shows rather obviously that *discourse* is an active whole and *text* is its passive result. But can we accept this definition without any reservation? First, as a matter of fact, there is no doubt that any text turns into discourse when being read or reproduced. It is also appropriate to consider the theory of the classification of speech functions offered by V.V. Vinogradov who states that any form of speech is based on the communicative function of the language (Vinogradov 1963). Therefore, it is not surprising to come across the trend which states that though traditionally the text is viewed as a complex made up of interrelated successive elements, the result of a creative process endowed with certain stability devoid of mobility, still, this idea can be considered acceptable as long as the text has not entered a communicative process and has not turned into a dialogue between the author and the reader which brings it very close to discourse itself. It is not accidental that the complete whole in the form of a written document which has come into being as a result of the speech-making process and meets certain requirements, enjoys certain pragmatic freedom (Gal'perin 1981) and is distinguished with possibilities of intrinsic and extrinsic manifestations (Morokhovskiy 1981; 1989). This makes it possible to view *text* as a real communicative unit, to perceive it as a high-level system whose structural composition is conditioned by the very communicative intention of speech-production.

This multi-dimensional nature of the text, naturally, creates certain challenges for its perception, understanding and interpretation, particularly as far as a literary text, first and foremost associated with a piece of literary work, is described as a special type of text: apart from enjoying the features of coherence and integrity typical of any text, a literary work is also distinguished with ideological and aesthetic unity which is realized in any text through an inseparable and indivisible link between the content and form.

It has been established that various lexical, grammatical, stylistic and logical links, as well as unique text-forming units are of special significance for any text. However, the choice of most diverse linguistic means and their combinations in a text are far more important since it is the very choice of these units that comes to define the impact the author intends to make on the reader by provoking a certain emotional state. The information here is not logical, but mostly emotional, evaluative and, broadly speaking, aesthetic-imaginative (Arnol'd 1990). Hence, the use of various linguistic means, including the expressive ones, is conditioned by the very purport of the text and the far-reaching intention of the author.

Being the unique and imaginary reverberation of the reality rather than its direct and mirror reflection, the literary work contains certain conditionality. And though it heavily rests upon the objective reality and feeds on it, the linguistic units it contains do not represent the tangible and visible objects of the reality. Otherwise stated, on the one hand, it reproduces the surrounding world that is perceivable in the framework of human experience, and on the other hand, it is fictitious, imaginative and comes to reflect the border of the author's imaginative perception of the reality. The author may choose this or that object or phenomenon of the reality and reproduce them artistically. However, despite the differences between the works born out of this process, they undoubtedly bear the seal of the author's worldvision and linguistic mentality since they are always formed under the influence of the social, economic and various other external factors of the given time period. In this case, the reader's personal descriptive features, his ideological, psychological qualities, as well as worldvision take the lead. And since a truly valuable and

high-quality literary work, transgressing its time, reflects the existing problems of the society, the reader, relying on his own, personal experience and ideas, always faces a certain challenge when trying to deeply perceive the issues raised by the author and to re-evaluate the nature of the reality the author describes.

The Unity of Form and Content in Understanding Process

When examining the problems related to text perception, the issue of the unity of form and content acquires special importance. The form of the work, in fact, is quite a complicated and comprehensive notion since it includes not only stylistic functional, phraseological coherence and syntactic structure, but also certain phonetic and rhythmic peculiarities, which often help the author “hide” the intention proper consciously or unconsciously. As far as the content of a literary work is concerned, it is not homogenous in terms of perception, understanding and interpretation. As a matter of fact, it is a hierarchical system which is presented as a unity of linguistic, stylistic, imaginary, aesthetic and ideological contents. Investigations indicate that perception will occur only when the reader passes through all the levels of this system, from the lowest to the highest where he will be able to reveal the general idea of the work and the intent of the author (Gasparyan 2006).

If the reading of a piece of literature is broadly viewed as a specific manifestation of communication, the author and the reader acquire no less importance, they act as opposite sides of the same whole. The fact is that the formation of the literary work is built upon the authorial intention, the idea that was born out of the demand to tell the reader the important information and this is accomplished by the author individually, in a unique way, conditioned by his own worldview, his emotional, psychological and mental peculiarities, thereby instilling or placing the so-called “authorial meaning” in the texture and composition of his work.

As research indicates, the initial important condition of text understanding is the knowledge of the given language. However, language competence can by no means be sufficient for full understanding and interpretation of the text. Here, the extra-linguistic knowledge and experience that are manifested in the text

content and linguistic composition in one way or another are of particular significance. And since the author's target is a certain category of readers when writing any piece of work, he, as an addresser chooses and combines a complex of linguistic and extralinguistic knowledge in his work which will be available to the reader. This will give the latter a chance to understand the author, to process and analyze the reading material, understand and interpret it. As is the case with any type of text, in the literary text as well, the semantic-structural features, i.e. the features which are the result of the creative process of the author, are of foremost importance.

We have to agree that the complex mechanism of perception is not confined to this, since, as already mentioned, the factors of experience, knowledge, level of consciousness and memory are of no less importance. Nonetheless, the initial stage of understanding starts with the creation of the sensory image of the object the perception of which is confined to the material shape of the object. It is evident that the first stage of the perception of the oral text is realized through hearing and that of the written text – through vision. In this regard, it is necessary to have an accurate idea of what the reading process is. In its primary meaning “to read” means to perceive what is written and to reproduce it loudly or in one's mind. However, when it comes to the reading of fiction, it becomes necessary to distinguish between two goals of reading – to read in order to perceive the factual information in this or that text and to read with the purpose of understanding the philologically subtle semantic and stylistic nuances. Evidently, the latter is more complicated since the perception of any piece of literary text can by no means be confined to the perception of the material form only. The dialectic interrelation between the form and the content displays more complicated manifestations owing to the multi-layered system of the content of the work. This well explains the specific challenge of reading and understanding a piece of fiction, since the mutual relation of the writer and the reader is anchored on the purpose of perceiving and understanding the ideological and aesthetic “information”, rather than on revealing the mere plot of the work.

Stages of Understanding Process

The process of text understanding runs as follows: first the analysis of perception takes place which is paralleled with the attempt of the recipient to analyze the meaning of the lexical elements and make some guesses about the general contents. Then, proceeding from the results of the separate stages of analysis, the obtained results are combined and synthesized. The examination of the perception process brings close to the adequate psychological recognition of linguistic images, and they are preserved in our short-term memory. This, in its turn, is followed by the identification of certain constituent semantic elements in the general semantic structure of word-images which are of paramount importance for understanding the whole. Thus, in the given semantic situation and the given context the combination of the separate semantic elements shapes our understanding of the whole.

It has been established that the possibility of various interpretations of one and the same work is not uncommon for fiction. This, in fact, is one of the underlying characteristics of a literary work. Usually a piece of imaginative writing has no specific addressee and, as mentioned above, is targeted at a group of readers with a certain level of intelligence who share a certain common feature while differing in many others. Nevertheless, the general semantic core of a literary work should be accessible for a wide circle of readers and not transpass its border. Its guarantee is the program of text interpretation, which the author places in the basis of his work having in mind the requirements of his intention and the presumable developmental level of the reader who is the addressee. Thus, we can see that the challenges of perceiving and understanding a work of literature depend on not only the complex nature of the text and its characteristics, but also the factor of the reader himself. And since the latter is quite another personality and often belongs to another age, another generation, and represents a new mentality, there is little likelihood that he may directly penetrate into the world of the author, re-live his life, re-experience the same emotions and feelings, let alone the fact that in the course of time the author himself may change his own attitude towards his own work, in fact, introducing new meanings and shades of meanings into the so-called "authorial

meaning” of the work. No matter how hard the reader tries to reproduce and recreate the “authorial meaning”, he is sure to fail, since he is guided by his own personality, his own life experience and his own inner world. This is the reason why the reader, based on his own perceptions and interpretations, enjoys a certain amount of freedom in shaping the “meaning” of the literary text. However, the border of the freedom stretches up to that of the opportunities provided by the text itself and the linguistic units used in it. Here, “inner speech” comes to help. As a matter of fact, it is the most reliable factor guiding the process of perception, understanding and interpretation since it best reflects the essence proper of the literary work enhancing the phonetic, rhythmic, melodic and timbre specificities it contains. The importance of “inner speech” has found its clarification in the works of L.V. Shcherba, where he emphasizes the necessity of the phonetic interpretation of poetic speech (Shcherba 1957; cf. also Coleridge 1956).

The fact of the text is not a simple phenomenon itself, at least for the reason that there is some disproportionality between the objects of reality and their textual reproductions. It is known that the objects of the external world are endowed with numerous or almost infinite number of features whose reproduction in the text without any selection or choice may turn the text into an unbound and infinite domain. On the other hand, it is quite clear that any work of speech is supposed to be complete in a sense. This fact pushes the author into a corner of contradiction: on the one hand the author needs to describe and recreate the multi-faceted object of the real world with the help of a limited number of linguistic elements which would expand the borders of the text to infinity, on the other, he has to provide the completeness of the text. Which is the way out?

Depending on the scope of his interests, social stance and world vision, the author chooses those features of the real life objects that are important from the point of view of his ideological and aesthetic intentions while leaving behind the features of less significance or, more precisely, hiding them most carefully between the lines of the text. The features the author considers important come to shape the skeleton of the text and serve as a basis for the text perception by

the reader. In this process the reader, i.e. the addressee himself builds his own text based on his personal background, ignoring certain things, perceiving others in a distorted way or adding something more. Perhaps, this can help explain the fact that the impressions and the impact of the same text vary owing to the psychological, mental and social differences of the readers. The similarities in their interpretations depend on the amount of common characteristic features the readers have. It is these descriptive features of the potential readers that turn out to be decisive for the author in the process of creating his literary text. And since the latter is re-created by the efforts of the reader who is out of the direct control of the author, there emerges the necessity for the reader himself to take charge of the direct control of the re-creation of the text. The text, with all its peculiarities, becomes the sole reality in the process of the literary communication, which takes the lead in the reader's perception. All the means and preconditions for the text perception that regulate the whole process of reading are placed in the text from the very start. The sum total of all these factors gives rise to the so-called program of text perception, and the fact that some linguists figuratively describe the program of text perception, understanding and interpretation as a labyrinth is by no means accidental (Eco 1983).

Conclusion

Thus we can conclude that the only way out of this labyrinth is to be aware of the fact that the "meaning" of the work is built by the collective efforts of both the author and the reader, and that the proceeding point in the whole process is the language of the work. The appropriate choice and arrangement of linguistic units by the writer, whether intuitively or knowingly provides a basis for possible objective understanding of the work. Therefore, reading, understanding and interpreting a work of literature calls for the perception of the dialectical correlation of content and form, as well as appreciation of the work as an aesthetic whole.

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Գեղարվեստական տեքստի հասկացման ծրագրի շուրջ

Գեղարվեստական տեքստի քննությանն առնչվող խնդիրները լուսաբանվել են տարաբնույթ ուսումնասիրություններում, որոնք սակայն աչքի են ընկնում որոշակի տարակարծությամբ: Իրավիճակն ավելի է բարդանում այն իրողությամբ, որ վերջին ժամանակներս գիտական շրջանառության մեջ հայտնված *դիսկուրս* հասկացությունը էլ ավելի է դժվարացնում *տեքստ – դիսկուրս* հարաբերակցության շրջանակներում այդ երկու երևույթների հստակ սահմանազատման հնարավորությունը: Սույն հոդվածը ուշադրություն է սևեռում *տեքստ – դիսկուրս* հարաբերակցության խնդիրներին, գեղարվեստական տեքստը դիտարկում որպես յուրօրինակ հաղորդակցություն գրողի և ընթերցողի միջև, ներկայացնում գեղարվեստական տեքստի ընկալման ու հասկացման գործընթացի հաջորդական փուլերի բնութագրական գծերը:

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Call for Papers

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE DEDICATED TO THE CENTENARY OF YEREVAN STATE UNIVERSITY

LANGUAGE, CULTURE, COMMUNICATION

April 22-23, 2019

Dear colleagues,

The Faculty of Romance and Germanic Philology (Yerevan State University, Armenia, Yerevan) is planning the International Conference “Language, Culture, Communication” in April 2019 dedicated to the Centenary of Yerevan State University.

The conference will focus on issues concerning the interrelations of language, culture and communication in the paradigm of interdisciplinary contexts.

Suggested areas of investigation:

1. Current Issues in Armenology
2. Cognitive-Linguistic Approaches to Language Studies
3. Concepts and Conceptual Fields
4. Communication across Cultures
5. Communication in Politics and Business
6. Domain-Specific Discourse: Theory and Practice
7. Current Developments in Teaching EFL and ESL
8. Interlingual and Intralingual Translation
9. Linguocognitive Approaches to Literary Studies
10. Other

Working languages of the conference will be Armenian, English, Russian. The official deadline for submission of abstracts (up to 300 words, Sylfaen, font size 11) is **November 1, 2018**. Notification of acceptance by Scientific Program Committee will be available **by December 15, 2018**. The timing is 20 minutes for plenary lectures and 15 minutes for panel session papers.

Proposals should be mailed directly to conflcc2019@ysu.am for approval by the Scientific Program Committee which will also readily accept offers to convene a session.

The registration fee should be paid after the approval of Scientific Program Committee **by February 1, 2019** (details of payment will be informed).

We are looking forward to seeing you in person at the Conference which will be a perfect place for sharing many practical and theoretical ideas.

Participation in absentia will not be provided.

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