

The linguistic representation of characters as readers in *Pride and Prejudice*

A representação de personagens leitores em *Orgulho e Preconceito*

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Resumo: *Este trabalho pretende fazer uma análise da linguagem do romance Orgulho e Preconceito, escrito por Jane Austen e publicado em 1813. Mais especificamente, irei analisar a linguagem usada para descrever personagens que são leitores, a partir de uma perspectiva enunciativa, que está baseada na ideia de que cada escolha feita pelo autor (enunciador) de uma frase é significativa. Portanto, uma vez que entendamos as escolhas que o autor faz quando descreve um leitor, seremos capazes de discernir melhor quais são suas expectativas sobre seus leitores. De modo a desenvolver este estudo, trechos de Orgulho e Preconceito que estão relacionados às descrições de dois personagens-leitores (Elisabeth Bennet e Mr. Collins) foram lidos e selecionados. Esta seleção passou por uma série de investigações linguísticas, baseadas na teoria da enunciação elaborada por Émile Benveniste em seus livros Problemas de Linguística Geral I e II, que proporcionaram uma melhor compreensão de como Jane Austen propõe linguisticamente suas ideias sobre leitura/leitores.*

Palavras-chave: *Representação – Leitura – Leitor – Orgulho e Preconceito – Jane Austen*

Abstract: *This paper intends to make an analysis of the language in the novel Pride and Prejudice, written by Jane Austen and first published in 1813. More specifically, I will analyse the language used to describe characters who are readers, through an enunciative perspective. It was based on the idea that every choice made by the author (enunciator) of a sentence is meaningful. Therefore, once we understand the choices the author makes when describing a reader, we are able to have a better understanding of what this author expects of his/her readers. In order to carry out the study, I read and selected the parts of Pride and Prejudice which are related to the descriptions of two characters (Elisabeth Bennet and Mr. Collins) as readers. Afterwards, this selection underwent a series of linguistic investigations, based on the enunciative theory developed by Émile Benveniste throughout his books Problemas de Linguística Geral I e II. These investigations enabled an understanding of how Jane Austen conveys her ideas concerning reading/readers linguistically speaking.*

Key words: *Representation – Reading – Readers – Jane Austen- Pride and Prejudice*

1. Introduction

Every piece of literary work is based on some linguistic substract. This means that all literature exists because someone made use of language in use, with all its apparatus and that resulted in one or many statements. Nevertheless, the nature of these enunciations are not the same as the nature of spoken language, for, firstly, they are done through writing, which means that the cognitive process is more complex. Secondly, enunciation, according to Benveniste (1970), “is, explicitly or implicitly, an allocution”, or else, it postulates someone to whom the statement is directed to. In literature, this allocutor is more universal, for the author cannot perceive how many or who are going to be his/her readers.

The understanding of literature as a statement of an enunciation allows us to look into the language of, for instance, a novel as the expression of someone’s subjectivity. Thus, we need to understand that the enunciation and the statement are two different things: the enunciation is “colocação da língua em funcionamento por um ato individual de utilização” (Benveniste apud Flores, 2009: 102), and the statement is “a manifestação da enunciação, produzida cada vez que se fala” (Benveniste apud Flores, 2009: 107). Every enunciator leaves some marks of the enunciation on the statement, or, in other words, he/she leaves some marks of his/her subjectivity on the statement.

The marks of subjectivity left on the language used by an enunciator are various. They are, according to Benveniste (1970), traditionally, the personal and demonstrative pronouns, the time tenses, and the punctuation. But, if we take one step forward and see things from a larger perspective, all language is subjective, because all language used by the locutor is a matter of his/her choices.

Having this whole theoretical discussion in mind, we might now look into literature with a different focus, understanding it as a statement that holds the marks of its author’s enunciation. Therefore, I am going to analyze how these subjective marks happen in Jane Austen’s novel, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), with a specific focus on the language she uses when describing a reader. This analysis will help with the understanding of what the author’s ideas about reading and readers were.

The specific categories of analysis will derive from the texts themselves: I will make out a pattern of usages (syntactic and semantic) in relation to the semantic field of “reading”. From those patterns, I will organize what are the main structures and lexical choices the author uses when referring to readers or reading.

2. *Pride and Prejudice*

Jane Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice* was firstly published in 1813. Its story revolves around the life of Mr. Bennet’s daughters, specially the second oldest: Elisabeth. The Bennets are part of the rural gentry, a social class which is below the aristocracy, but is entitled to land – therefore, above the working

class. However daughters of the owner of Longbourn property, Jane, Elisabeth, Mary, Kitty or Lydia may not inherit the state, for, according to the Entail Law, only male heirs may become state holders.

With this situation in view, the only way for women to be settled in life was getting married – or else they would become *spinsters*, lonely people and a burden to the rest of their family. Therefore, the main problem of the Bennet girls is finding a suitable husband, one who could most likely make them both comfortably settled in life and happy. This is, mainly, the problem of every women of that time: she could either find a husband (who might not be the ideal one) and have stability, or be unmarried and a member of the society who did not fulfill her social duty.

In this sense, Jane Austen is sharply critical throughout her writings: her characters question themselves about which are the important values in the choice of a husband, and what is the validity of getting married in order to succeed in life, risking all the chances of a happy life – as Elisabeth questions herself in view of her best friend’s marriage:

“The strangeness of Mr. Collins making two offers of marriage within three days, was nothing in comparison of his being now accepted. She had always felt that Charlotte’s opinion of matrimony was not exactly like her own, but she could not have supposed it would be possible that when called into action, she would have *sacrificed every better feeling to worldly advantage*. Charlotte the wife of Mr. Collins, was a most humiliating picture! – And to the pang of a friend disgracing herself and sunk in her esteem, *was added the distressing conviction that it was impossible for that friend to be tolerably happy in the lot she had chosen.*” (Austen, 2006: 280) (our highlighting)

This kind of criticism reflects on the way her female characters’ education is dwelt on in the novel. Reading is important for Austen, and she puts in the voice of one of her most sensible characters, Mr. Darcy, that women need to be proficient readers, able to reflect upon what they read and to have a large cultural background: “‘All this she must possess,’ added Darcy, ‘and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading.’” (Austen, 2006: 231). This conception of well-educated and well-read women as being the ideal is not as freeing as it might appear, if we consider that Jane Austen proposes that women read with precaution, something we may assume from her social context:

“Na passagem do século XVIII para o XIX, produzem-se manuais de autoria de educadores teólogos e filósofos, que, diante da propagação dos livros que têm nas mulheres seu publico preferido, orientam os consumidores para a attitude mais correta a tomar. Mesmo intelectuais e militantes do sexo feminino adotam esta attitude, como Mary Wollstonecraft que, em *Thoughts on the education of daughters*, de 1787, discute o tipo de obra a ser lida pelas jovens, recomendando evitar as que apresentam um ‘relato equivocado das paixões humanas’, pois podem estimular a sensibilidade de maneira indesejada.” (Lajolo and Zilberman, 2009: 94-95)

Thus, we may expect that the author presents certain qualities in her readers, either good or bad, that may hint us what kind of people they are according to the way they read. That is not restricted only to female characters (despite their being much more central in the novel), but it is also important for us to understand all her characters. In the next section, I will analyze the language used to describe the reading of two of these characters, Elisabeth Bennet and Mr. Collins, in order to better illustrate how the author formulates different kinds of reading.

3. Readers in *Pride and Prejudice*

3.1. Elisabeth Bennet, the exemplar reader

Elisabeth is the second oldest daughter of Mr. Bennet. She is the protagonist of the novel, and is depicted as a very smart young woman, with a sharp sense of humor. Her liveliness and authenticity attract the attention of Mr. Darcy, the richest (but proudest) bachelor in her society. Her accomplishment does not own only to her society qualities, but also to her quickness of thought, which Darcy believes very interesting, along with her caring for reading books.

By overlooking into the passages in which Elisabeth reads (either books or letters), we can perceive that she is a special kind of reader in the novel: she is sensitive to what she reads, but she is also very critical and ground-footed. That is a reflection of the word Jane Austen chooses to describe the lady's reading.

In the majority of scenes Elisabeth is the reader, we can see adjectives and nouns that are related to the semantic field of *feelings*, as it shows in the following extract of the moment she reads Mr. Darcy's letter explaining to her the nature of the facts behind her denial to his proposal of marriage:

“But such as they were, it may be well supposed how *eagerly* she went through them, and what a *contrariety of emotion* they excited. *Her feelings* as she read were scarcely to be defined. With *amazement* did she first understand that he believed any apology to be in his power; and stedfastly was she persuaded that he could have no explanation to give, which a just sense of shame would not conceal.” (Austen, 2006: 321)

All the expressions highlighted are related to a kind of feeling, which shows a great sensibility towards the content of the letter (her reading object). She goes through it *eagerly*, and that results in a *contrariety of emotion*. While she reads, Elisabeth has undescribable *feelings*, and her understandings come with a sense of *amazement*. But the description goes on, and Austen again tells us that the girl read the letter with *eagerness* and *impatience*: “[...] she read, with an *eagerness* which hardly left her power of

comprehension, and from *impatience* of knowing what the next sentence might bring, was incapable of attending to the sense of the one before her eyes.” (Austen, 2006: 321)

However, although the reading still lets *her feelings*, such as *astonishment*, *apprehension* and *horror*, *more painful and more difficult of definition*, there is another characteristic of Elisabeth’s readings in the following extract that shows us the usage of another semantic field, quite the opposite of the previous one, which is the one related to the carefulness of her readings, as she reads with *clearer attention*: “[...] when she read, with somewhat *clearer attention*, a relation of events, [...] *her feelings* were yet more acutely *painful* and more *difficult of definition*. *Astonishment*, *apprehension*, and even *horror*, oppressed her.” (Austen, 2006: 321)

Then, again, although *mortified* by the content of the letter, she goes on to make a thorough *examination of the meaning of every sentence*: “she again began the *mortifying perusal* of all that related to Wickham, and commanded herself so far as to *examine the meaning of every sentence*.” (Austen, 2006: 321). The usage of the words related to attention are not meaningless in these descriptions, they show us a depiction of an emotional woman that makes some effort against her overpowering feeling in order to reestablish her intellectual power over this emotions. After this rationalization of the reading, she is able to understand its contents much better, despite being still hurt from them: “But when she *read, and re-read* with the *closest attention*, [...] again was she forced to hesitate. She put down the letter, *weighed every circumstance* with what she meant to be *impartiality* -- *deliberated* on the probability of each statement [...]” (Austen, 2006: 322)

She does not only read, she *re-reads* the letter, with the *closest attention*. She *weighs* every probability, attempting to be *impartial* – which are all words related to the rationality with which she intends to read.

When not so much inflicted by the contents of the letters she receives, Elisabeth is capable of not going through so much effort, still reading with great attention and care, as when she was reading Jane’s letters while walking through Rosings Park, and Jane Austen describes it with verbs like *re-perusing* (which is strengthened by the suffix *re-*) and *dwelling on*: “She was engaged one day, as she walked, in *re-perusing* Jane's last letter, and *dwelling on* some passages which proved that Jane had not written in spirits,”(Austen, 2006: 310)

Finally, there is one scene in which Elisabeth is regarded (ironically) by Miss Bingley as *a great reader*. The Bennet girl disagrees with her, and denies being a great reader, but admits it is a great praise:

“Miss Eliza Bennet,’ said Miss Bingley, ‘despises cards. She *is a great reader* and has no pleasure in anything else.’

‘I deserve neither such praise nor such censure,’ cried Elizabeth; ‘*I am not a great reader*, and I have pleasure in many things.’ (Austen, 2006: 230)

Either agreeing or not with Miss Bingley, the fact is that the only time Elisabeth is described with the word *reader*, the adjective that comes along with it is *great*.

3.2. Mr. Collins, a problematic reader

Mr. Collins is a distant cousin of Mr. Bennet, who is to inherit the Bennet's property once the father is deceased. He is the very opposite of Elisabeth: obnoxious, self-important and extremely pompous, he arrives to visit the family in order to get married with one of the girls. His first choice is Jane, but after being talked out of that idea by Mrs. Bennet, he settles for Elisabeth. She denies his proposal, and he ends up marrying Charlotte Lucas, Elisabeth's best friend, and a relatively old maid who just accepts him to gain some stability in her life.

The reading Mr. Collins performs is very alike his discourse: falsely humble, but actually very pedantic, and extremely empty. The way Jane Austen finds to deal with this lack of depth in his readings is by always describing them through a kind of parallelism or comparison. It is what happens when Mr. Collins is in the library with Mr. Bennet and is *nominally engaged* in reading a large book, *but really talking with little cessation*: "Mr. Collins had followed him after breakfast, and there he would continue, *nominally engaged with one of the largest folios in the collection, but really talking to Mr. Bennet, with little cessation*, of his house and garden at Hunsford." (Austen, 2006: 249)

Once Mr. Bennet gets tired of his talking, he invites him to walk the ladies to the town near the property, and Mr. Collins accepts because he is, according to the narrator, a better walker than he is a reader: "Mr. Collins, being in fact *much better fitted for a walker than a reader*," (Austen, 2006: 249). Both the situations hereby described present the man doing something else with much more pleasure or with much more ability than reading.

In a slightly different approach, Austen presents us the leisure time of Mr. Collins, including reading in a list which is completed by working in the garden, writing and looking out of the window. Therefore, we can assume that these four activities share some similarities, for they are listed in the same hierarchical position, which is probably the superficiality they are done with: "the time between breakfast and dinner was now passed by him [Mr. Collins] either *at work in the garden, or in reading and writing, and looking out of window in his own book room*," (Austen, 2006: 302).

Finally, there is one description of Mr. Collins actually performing a reading out loud for his cousins. Apart from the uninteresting choice of book (a book of sermons), having in view that his audience was made of young women, the words Austen uses to describe his way of reading are incredibly elucidative: "[...] he chose Fordyce's Sermons. Lydia gaped as he opened the volume, and before he had, *with very monotonous solemnity*, read three pages, she interrupted him with," (Austen, 2006: 248)

The only thing we can expect of a character that is described as “*a better walker*” and who reads with “*very monotonous solemnity*” is for him to be a very problematic reader.

4. Conclusions

The reading theme is very prolific in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. Many of her characters are readers, either good or bad ones. We were able to see, throughout this study, how the author formulates linguistically the qualities of Elisabeth Bennet’s and Mr. Collins’ readings – how she reinforces some choices in order to better depict the kind of readers they are. These choices also show us the kind of reading Austen expects from her readers.

Deriving from the previous analysis, we may conclude that Mr. Collins is definitely not Austen’s ideal kind of reader. She does not expect that people put this activity in the same level of walking, or talking or looking out of the window, as Mr. Collins, one of the least intelligent characters of the book, does. On the contrary, she expects her readers to get involved with whatever they read.

This involvement is depicted very properly in Elisabeth’s kinds of reading. Austen expects her reader to get involved with their readings not only rationally, but also emotionally. The kind of words she chooses to describe her protagonist, a pleasing and smart girl, hint us that reading is related both to feeling and to rationalizing, as the following chart summarizes, presenting the expressions used in the descriptions:

Chart 1

Type of Semantic Field	Words/ Expressions Used
Feeling related words	<i>Eagerly; contrariety of emotion; feelings; amazement; eagerness; impatience; astonishment; apprehension; horror; painful; mortifying.</i>
Rationality related words	<i>Clearer attention; examine the meaning of every sentence; re-read; closest attention; weighed every circumstance; impartiality; deliberated; re-perusing; dwelling on.</i>

To sum up, we can conclude that Jane Austen’s choices as an enunciator left deep marks of her ideas about reading through the language used to describe readers in her fiction. We can also point to the kind of reader she expected to go through her novels: a concentrated, caring person, who would get

emotionally involved by the content of what was read, without being swept away by the feelings it would excite, and, conversely, would exert the abilities of comprehension and reflection over the readings.

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