

A Pragma-stylistic Study of Using the Present Tense in Narratives

**دراسة تداولية إسلوبية في إستعمال
صيغة المضارع في الروائيات**

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المخلص

تختلف لغة الأدب الى حد ما عن اللغة الشائعة (التداولية) بين الناس بوصفها مليئة بالزيادات ، أي بمعنى الانحراف عن النمط اللغوي السائد على رأي عالم اللغة (برات) حيث يؤكد أن اللغة المتداولة تستند الى معايير شائعة بين المتكلمين تتواءم هذه المعايير مع معايير اللغوي الشهير (كرايس) التي تتناول اصول ومعايير الخطاب.

يتناول البحث وظائف الزمن المضارع والية تأثيرها في الجنس القصصي على القاريء، على هذا يلجا معظم الكتاب الى تغير الزمن من الماضي الى المضارع البسيط لاجل ان يكون النص مشوقا ، في هذا الصدد يبدو ان الكاتب يلجا في بعض الاحيان الى استخدام المضارع البسيط لالقاء الضوء على بعض المشاهد ونقدها بشكل محايد عما يجري في ثنايا النص .

Abstract

It is normally known that " literary language " is different from " ordinary language " . That is , it is full of deviation , while, Prat,(1977:80) maintains that " ordinary language " is accompanied by ordinary rules , and outlines the work of Grice (1975)

concerning the appropriate conditions that accepting a particular illocution-conditions which language users assume to be in effect.

In this study , the present tense is not referred to as an indication to the moment of speaking or action . Rather , in narratives , it signals that this genre is " unmediated " . As such , the present tense is heavily used by writers , regardless of the time being , to signify that a text can be read at any time. Moreover, it can be noted , that the shift from the past to the simple present tense offers readers an opportunity to think seriously of what is being said . It, thus,invites thought and suspense . As far as the writer is concerned , it seems that the writer resorts to the simple present tense just to comment , highlight and criticize some incidents or events within the story.

1. Introduction

2. The pragmatics of tense

Tense is normally totaled to be part of the deictic system, since it pinpoints actions or events in relation to the moment of speaking. Nonetheless, the situation in fictional discourse differs from the canonical situation. The normal narrative tense in fiction is the simple past: it is best interpreted not as a time-based or deictic marker, but as a generic marker. That this is so is readily seen by the fact that we are not distressed by the normal amalgamation of past-tense narrative with the present tense in dialogue. (In dialogue, of course, tense has its standard deictic values, as it is representational of real world discourse). It is also suitable because fictions are often told by a narratorwho relates events as though they are past, with unaffected or assumed reflection, whether or not the author has decided how the story will end. That is why even novels set in the future may be narrated in the past tense: it is used for the narration of any imagined world, past, present, or future.

Essentially, tense functions deictically within narratives, which essentially means that the perfect tenses have a deictic function withinthe fictional discourse, whereas other tenses do not typically have this function. In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*(1961/1965:

54), Muriel Spark writes: the sewing sisters had not as yet been induced to judge Miss Brodie... . We can note the complexity of temporal system here: the perfect tense works in relation to the normal base line of the narrative, while as yet is the narrator's hint that the situation will alter in the (fictional) future. The reader is disguising with information which will, in the light of other elements in the fiction, have to be prepared in a temporal sequence in order to work out the development of the plot. In this respect, as in some others, the language of literary discourse differs fascinatingly from standard language. Thus, the pragmatic interpretation of a perfect tense differs from the interpretation of the simple past.

3. Present tense in fiction

Attention has been drawn to the widespread use of the present tense in texts such as synopses, chapter headings and author's notes. It is asserted that this signals that the narrative is 'unmediated': that is, the author may not have decided what kind of narratorial voice to use (Stanzel, 1984: 22-44). In any case, such examples are not part of narrative proper, and in that sense are also related to some of the uses of the present tense when the narrative past is temporarily abandoned, which will be considered here. The issue is interesting precisely because tense is so commonly used to signal changes in the focalisation or perspective, or even its total absence, as in the text types considered by Stanzel. Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 122) argue that this use is simply that the viewpoint in such texts is that of a text which can be read at any time; they note that it is commonly used in stage directions - as such, it is a timeless use of the tense.

3.1 Present tense for past event

The present tense is occasionally used to suggest simultaneity of narration and event: so now I am at Avignon... in three minutes you will see me crossing the bridge upon a mule...(Sterne, 1760-7/1980: VII, 41). It is quite clear that this is retrospective narration

(there is a willful confusion between the temporal situations of the character, writing time and reading time).

Sometimes whole novels, or parts of them, are written in the present tense, as a substitute for the narrative past. These uses are not particularly interesting, since the originality soon wears off, and the interpretive process is seldom affected by the base tense of the narrative. Some chapters of Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend* are in the present tense; in the case of those dealing with the Veneerings, it may be that the present suggests that they are as superficial as their name suggests, and lack a 'past'. Spark's *The Driver's Seat* (1970/1974) is in the present tense, and therefore the future is used for prolepses (anticipations): she will be found tomorrow morning dead from multiple stab-wounds...(25); on the evening of the following day he will tell the police ...(27). Such passages prove that the narrative is in fact retrospective; here the present tense does not mean that the narrative is simultaneous with the events. This use of the present tense is essentially the 'historical' present, and so differs radically from the instantaneous present, which describes an activity as it takes place.

3.2 Present in vernacular narrative

The present tense is recurrently used in oral narratives, seemingly for the sake of added emphasis; it definitely seems designed to rise interest and involvement by the audience (see Brown and Levinson, 1987: 205; Georgakopoulou, 1993; Georgakopoulou and Goutsos, 1997). As such, it focuses on a significant point in the narrative. The use of the present in vernacular narratives (discussed in Leech, 1971) is reverberated by Dickens in *Our Mutual Friend*: *it being so, here is Saturday evening come, and here is Mr. Venus come, and ringing at the Bower-gate* (1864/1971: 350). Georgakopoulou and Goutsos also draw attention to the use of the present tense to segment narrative.

3.3 Instantaneous present

Another use of the present tense can be noticed in narratives, namely the instantaneous present, where the action is seen to be simultaneous with the narrative process. It is common in broadcast sports commentaries, and in demonstrations, when the action is described as it takes place. This characterized use of the present tense is, predictably, rare in fiction, but it is intermittently found. In *Our Mutual Friend* a young man describes what he sees from his window:

‘two belated wanderers in the mazes of the law,’ said Eugene...’stray into the court. They examine the door-posts of number one, seeking the name they want. Not finding it at number one, they come to number two. On the hat of wanderer number two, the shorter one, I drop this pellet. Hitting him on the hat, I smoke serenely, and become absorbed in the contemplation of the sky.’

(1864/1971: 340)

The first part of the passage is odd, since we would normally use the progressive (or continuous) present to describe an on-going activity. This example is not, of course, in the narratorial voice; Eugene is reporting what he sees from the window to his companion, but is doing so in a narratorial style; the fundamental form for narrative is the simple tense (see Dahl, 1985: 112). It is interesting that at the end of the paragraph, Eugene does describe an act just as he carries it out. As Leech (1971: 3) has emphasized, it is more common to use the present continuous when describing an action as it is performed. He considers that this kind of the present tense is rather dramatic.

Spark’s *Not to Disturb* (1971/1974) is a novel where one could find the instantaneous present: the narration is synchronic with the events described, and thus has an organic motivation since it is written in ‘real time’. The ‘three unities’ of the Greek drama are observed: the action happens overnight, the characters are all gathered in one house; (it is perhaps a prerequisite of a fiction of this type that the time should be sharply limited). the action

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involves the suicide of the owner, after he has murdered his wife and secretary, events which have been planned, or at the very least foreseen, by the servants, who are the main characters in the fiction. When the time for the action arrives, the servants treat it as still it had already happened:

‘ he was a very fine man in his way. The whole of Geneva got a great surprise.‘

‘will get a great surprise, 'Eleanor says.

‘let us not split hairs,’ says Lister, between the past, present, and future tenses.‘

...

‘the poor late Baron,’ says Heloise.

‘precisely,’ says Lister. ‘ he’ll be turning up soon. In the Buick, I should imagine.‘

(ibid: 6)

One can see that there is a play here on the correlation between the omniscience of the narrator and God’s foreknowledge. The narrative proceeds in the present tense, with sporadic occurrences of the perfect in summarizing passages: ‘The doctor has scrutinized the bodies, the police have taken their statements, they have examined and photographed the room’ (ibid: 89). The present perfect is used here to mark the current relevance of the event, and return to the base line of the narrative. Leech calls this use the ‘resultative past’ (1971: 34).

However, there is one stimulating use of the ‘historic present’, when a priest is called to the house. He explains his presence: ‘ I was in bed and the phone rings. Sister Baron is asking for me. It’s urgent, she says, he’s screaming. So here I am. Now I don’t hear a sound. Everyone’s gone to sleep’ (Spark, 1971/1974: 49). This may be accounted for in the ways considered above; it is also the case that the speaker is not highly educated, so a vernacular style of narrative may be held to be particularly appropriate. The speaker probably intends to convey irritation at being disturbed. It does not disrupt the present tense of the narrative, which is recognized as the

norm, and so does not draw special attention to itself, though the past tense might be expected in such a situation. There is, in fact, a single example of the past tense in fiction, when the quasi-omniscient butler is told the real identity of the mad man in the attic: 'that,' said Lister, 'I did not know' (ibid: 38). This must be a rare example of the commonest reporting verb in fiction used in contextually deviant way; it stresses itself, being foregrounded against the norms indicated by the text. The knowledge that Lister acquires here is highly important, and brings about a change in the servants' 'plot'. (It appears that the madman in the attic is not a remote relation, but the heir; the priest is quickly obliged to marry a pregnant housemaid to the lunatic, thus ensuring even greater financial rewards than the servants had expected to receive.) The novel ends with the future tense: 'by noon they will be covered in the profound sleep of those who have kept faithful vigil all night...' (ibid: 96).

The affectivity of the present tenses is recognized in this fiction because of the synchronicity between event and narration; the fiction also demonstrates the unscrupulous qualities of the narrator (embodied in this case in the servants, who have not only foreseen or plotted the events, but intend to make their fortunes by selling the story to the press.) Their manipulation is analogous to the author plotting the fiction before beginning to write. Lister, the butler, is fully aware of the grammatical and definitely narrational implications of tense. When discussing his memoirs, he slips into the past tense:

'there might be an unexpected turn of events,' says Eleanor.

'there was sure to be something unexpected,' says Lister. 'but what's done is about to be done and the future has come to pass. My memoirs up to funeral are as a matter of fact more or less complete.' (ibid: 9).

Lister, counting a bribe he has just received, remarks:

'small change,' he says 'compared with what is to come, or has already come, according as one's philosophy is temporal or eternal.

To all intents and purposes they're already dead although as a matter of banal fact, the night's business has still to accomplish itself.' (ibid: 12).

Lister then annotates that his employers have placed themselves... within the realm of predestination (ibid: 37). An omniscient narrator foreknows the future while narrating; the characters are preordained to carry out the plot, just as the unfortunate Baron is in this novel. Lister's comment is thus concerned with the nature of narrative.

An all-in-one web is created by the correspondence of plot, narrative technique and the comments thereby implied on the nature of fiction. There is a noticeable contrast between this novel, where the immediate present tense is organic and closely linked to the plot and Spark's constant interest in the relationship between narrators and God, and the trivial use of the instantaneous present in Dickens, cited above.

3.4 Present tense within past tense narrative

The present is found to be used for a number of purposes within narratives in the past tense. It functions contrastively in most fictions in which it occurs. It is often used at the epilogues of narratives to set the scene, or designate that the narrative proper has not yet launched. It seems usually to be the case that a shift into the present tense clarifies a departure from the narrative proper. Such departures are of various kinds, which will be tackled now.

It is found that the present tense is used in certain fictions where characters' thoughts are represented in free direct discourse. This is a distinctive use, quite different from a narrator using the present tense for a narrative which is clearly retrospective (as happens in *The Driver's Seat*). The latter are in what used to be termed the historical present , whereas the thoughts or words of a character focaliser will most naturally be reported in the present tense when there is no (visible) narratorial presence. This happens in, for

example, William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, a novel in which the reader has to piece together the narrative from the narrator other than the ascription of the various chapters to the characters:

' the signboard comes in sight. It is looking out at the road now, because it can wait. New Hope. 3 mi. it will say. New Hope. 3 mi. New Hope. 3 mi. And then the road will begin, curving away into the trees, empty with waiting, saying New Hope three miles.' (Faulkner, 1930/1963)

3.5 Iterative present

The iterative present is used, as the name implies, for actions which occur regularly, of the type *John walks to work*. It is used for activities which are perceived to extend from the past to the future (Leech, 1971): '*Wanda looks out of the window, I told Martin York. she sees spies in the grocer shop, following her.*' (Spark, 1988/1989). Here the narrator is reporting the mental suffering of a refugee who believes herself to be persecuted; the iterative present marks the habitual nature of her activity. It is obviously different from other uses of the present tense deliberated above.

3.6 The present tense and suspension of narrative

Once a narrator momentarily vacates his narratorial role to generalise, comment, or otherwise depart from his storytelling role, the tense often marks this departure, by a shift from the past to the simple present tense. The narrator may be occupied by generalisations or gnomic utterances (of the type a rolling stone gathers no mass), draw conclusions which are only imaginatively relevant to the purpose at hand, or invite the reader to ponder various alternatives. With generalisations, we are invited to perceive the general applicability of a comment move into the present tense suspends the narrative, however briefly. The effect of the present tense in these instances is to alter the scope of authority claimed by the narrator, and it creates an interpersonal bond with the reader. The fact that the present tense is more immediate perhaps also has the effect of drawing the reader's attention both to what is being said, and also to the fact that its relationship with the

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narrative is problematic: it thus invites thought and attention. Often such passages are more or less entertaining, or address the reader in an intimate way, suggesting shared knowledge and attitudes: ‘ I offer this advice without fee: it is included in the price of this book’ (Spark, 1988/1989: 11). Such generalizations can be found in the present tense, with the following clause returning to the narrative base line. Judgments may be offered on plot development or a character:

‘ such thoughts are known as hubris and are, on the whole, unwise. At half past twelve she wondered briefly whether she should drop in on one of her London friends for lunch.’ (Ellis, 1983/1985: 28)

Occasionally one wonders whether a generalization is attributable to character or narrator. It may of course be both – this seems to be the case in a passage in *Pride and Prejudice*: ‘What praise is more valuable than the praise of an intelligent servant?’ (Austen, 1813/1972:272). The norms of Elizabeth and the narrator are very close, so it makes little difference to the overall interpretation.

Tenseless clauses may have a comparable effect on making generalizations when the semantic content is appropriate:

‘ it had caused a major earthquake in the nineteenth century, and a repetition of this disaster was confidently predicted by seismologists and local millenarian sets: a rare and impressive instance of agreement between science and superstition.’ (Lodge, 1975/1979: 55).

Occasionally, narratorial generalizations which one might expect to occur in the present tense are in the narrative past: ‘ she did not know then that the price of allowing false opinions was the gradual loss of one’s capacity for forming true ones’ (Spark, 1987: 67). The motivation here may be to avoid breaking the narrative line, but it suggests that the character subsequently acquires this knowledge (know then contrasts with a later position of knowledge). Another, uncommon way of involving the reader is to

ask a question: ‘ or is it just that the past seems to contain more local colour than the present?’ (Barnes, 1984/1985: 15).

3.7 Other uses of the present tense

The present tense is occasionally used to set the scene at the beginning of a narrative, where it designates that the narrative proper has not yet begun. It is also used for descriptions that are felt to be of an enduring character. D. H. Lawrence does this sometimes at the epilogue of his fictions: in ‘Tickets, Please’ for example, the story is forwarded by a general account of the countryside in which the events take place, and the types of people involved in the fiction: ‘ there is in the Midlands a single-line tramway system...’ (1922/1995: 34). The text continues for some passages in a descriptive mode. When the narrative proper begins, the tense shifts to the past.

The present tense is likewise used of situations that are thought to hold generally (and so are essentially descriptive), with the past tense marking a return to the narrative line. Again, Lawrence offers an interesting example in the same novel: ‘ during these performances pitch darkness falls from time to time, when the machine goes wrong. Then there is a wild whooping, and a loud smacking of simulated kisses. In these moments John Thomas drew Annie towards him’ (ibid: 38). If the present tense does indeed have an empathetic function, it may suggest a motivation for its use in such instances.

Such shifts of tense within a text are interesting because they often mark a change in the scope of authority claimed by the narrator (see Fowler, 1981: 90). They are therefore significant for the pragmatic meanings encoded in the text, since the interpretation of any utterance depends upon the situation and the implied relations between addresser and addressee. The effect is thus to

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separate comments made in the ‘authorial’ voice from the narrative proper. The precise effect of the change in tense will vary according to the context and perhaps the norms established in the text, but its primary function is to make some change in the narrative mode. It is this use of the present tense, marking a departure from – or better, a comment on – the narrative that we have when the narrator addresses the reader: ‘ it is not to be supposed that Miss Brodie was unique at this point of her prime ...’ (Spark, 1961/1965:42).

The present tense is also used by narrators who comment explicitly on the development of their narrative. It is characteristic of Fielding: ‘ Reader, I think it proper, before we proceed any farther together, to acquaint thee, that I intend to digress ...’ (1749/1973: I, 2, 28) and occurs in Sparks, when she draws attention to apparently arbitrary shifts in the narrative: ‘ it is time now to speak of the long walk through the old parts of Edinburgh where Miss Brodie took her set ...’ (1961/ 1965: 27). In sum, the present tense functions contrastively in most fictions where it occurs. It is often used at the beginning of narratives to set the scene, which suggests that the narrative proper has not yet begun. In other instances, it is always worthy of extra attention.

4. Conclusion

It can be concluded that the present tense has specific functions in the literary discourse other than the syntactic function. In other words , the literary discourse will motivate and invoke more functions in addition to the function of the tense. One of the functions occurred in using this tense in literature is the pragmatic function. As such, the shift of tense within a text is of vital importance ; it almost signals a change in the scope of authority claimed by the narrator. Ultimately, this switching affects the interpretation of any utterance depending upon the situation and the implicit relations between addressor and addressee. Accordingly,

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the precise effect of the change in tense will vary according to the context, but its major function is to make some change in the narrative mode.

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