

A Stylistic Analysis of O. Henry's "Chatting" Effect
---in terms of the "tenor"

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I

O. Henry produced nearly three hundred pieces of short stories at the turn of the century. His works have been enjoying constant popularity among general readers. They were first published in popular magazines, and won a great number of readers. Since 1903, O. Henry had contributed to The New York Sunday World, the largest paper in America then, which attained a circulation of about half a million. O. Henry's stories have also been familiar overseas; they have been widely appreciated in England, Germany, USSR, Japan, and many other countries.¹

However, literary critics, after the rise of the "literary short story," started to degrade O. Henry, and excluded his short stories from canonized literature.² In spite of their constant popularity, O. Henry's works are presently rated aesthetically minor.

Yet the fact remains that popular readers highly appreciate O. Henry's stories, and the very fact should not be neglected if one wishes to hold fair to the author. Thanks to the advance in semiotics, Marxist criticism and so on, we are now aware that aesthetic value is not the objective, absolute value, but a value determined by the institutional criteria of the authoritative literary public. Even if O. Henry's works are regarded as of little "aesthetic" value by the authority, it does not mean they are of no value at all.

It is our intention to explore an alternative value so as to explain the popular appeal of O. Henry. In order to do so, it is necessary to explicate what kind of effect the works produced on readers. The present paper attempts to throw a light on the process of ordinary reading---the reading accomplished by the "reader" rather than the "critic"---of O. Henry's short stories.³

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One of the most prominent impressions O. Henry's writings convey is that of casual talk. The reader, in reading O. Henry's stories, feels as if he or she were listening to a friend talking to him. F. L. Pattee, who compiled a history of the American short story, gives attention to O. Henry's "chattiness" and "his familiarity with the reader." In the words of Pattee:

To read him [O. Henry] is at times almost to feel his physical presence. He slaps you on the shoulder, asks your advice on points of grammar and the wording of quotations, and you can almost hear his laugh when he springs his final ending.⁴

B. M. Ejxenbaum, a Russian formalist, also states, "O. Henry more often than not enters into conversation with his reader. . . conducting the story not from the standpoint of an impersonal commentator but from that of his own person."⁵ In fact, one can hardly read O. Henry's short stories without evoking in oneself an inner attitude of listening to the talk of a friend, so evidently that it is almost needless to quote the above critics.

In the following sections, the "chatting" effect that O. Henry's stories create shall be analyzed. It is assumed that O. Henry's stylistic elements, or overt linguistic features of O. Henry's texts, are responsible for the effect. The analysis owes much to the findings of so-called London School of sociolinguistics.

II

According to M. A. K. Halliday, language and the context of situation are closely related to each other. Situational factors determine the nature and the variety of the language employed, while the language at use reflects the surrounding social reality. Thus language and its relevant social context should be considered as a whole.⁶

It is true that artistic language of fiction should be treated separately from ordinary, everyday language. V. N. Vološinov has made a distinction between the language of

everyday living and that of poetry, and presented characteristic nature of each.⁷ But the language of poetry inevitably depends on the language of everyday living in greater or lesser degree. Since O. Henry's stories create effects on the reader just as the language of everyday conversation does on the listener, it is pertinent to study the language O. Henry employs in relation to the relevant situation.

Halliday refers to "the configuration of semantic resources that the member of a culture typically associates with a situation type" by the term "register." The register is determined by the following three dimensions---namely, "field", "tenor" and "mode". They are, each in other words, the social activity in a setting (including the subject-matter), the role relationships involved, and the channel of communication (the medium adopted). Each feature of the situation respectively determines "functional", "interpersonal", and "textual" components of the language---the three functional components of the semantic system. The three dimensions of the situation are interrelated, and so are the functional components of the linguistic system.⁸

Using this framework, one could explain the mechanism of the "chatting" effect of O. Henry's stories as follows: That one finds O. Henry's stories chatty and familiar, means that one figures the discourse of O. Henry's stories relevant to a casual, talking register. In respect of the tenor, for instance, the reader of O. Henry's short stories takes notice of casual interpersonal components in the text, and relates the discourse to a casual, relaxed tenor. We shall limit our present analysis to the aspect of tenor, though it is closely related to the other two aspects. (For example, the relation to an oral-aural mode is evident.)

III

Here let us examine some interpersonal features in the language O. Henry employs. First of all, O. Henry favors the first person narration. A large number of O. Henry's stories are written with "I"s and "you"s, if partially. The use of first and second person pronouns directly suggests personal

interaction between the addresser and the addressee, while the third person pronoun, as well as ordinary nouns, refers to an objective situation separate from the time-space of the act of communication.

Halliday makes a distinction between first and second person on the one hand and third person on the other. He states: While "a third person form typically refers anaphorically to a preceding item in the text," first and second person forms refer to "the speech roles of speaker and hearer." That is, the traditional category of first and second person, which Halliday calls "speech role", is that of the "persons defined by their roles in the communication process." "Other roles" or third person refer to all other relevant entities. In sum, "speech roles" typically refer to the context of situation "exophorically"; "other roles" are typically "anaphoric".⁹

The function of the first and the second person pronouns is made clear in Émile Benveniste's discussion. According to Benveniste, among so-called personal pronouns, the first and the second person pronouns alone are properly called "personal" pronouns; the third person pronoun essentially lacks personal nature. Benveniste sets forth the fact that "I" and "you" don't have permanent and objective referent or "object". What "I" and "you" refer to is the "instance de discours", or "the discrete and always unique acts through which langue is actualized into parole." Therefore "I" is defined as the "person who states in the present instance de discours containing the linguistic entity 'I'."¹⁰ "I", by definition, is the one addressing to "you", and, by the same token, "you" is the one addressed to by the "I". Besides "I" is the one referred to as well as the referring one.

In this sense, a discourse including either "I" or "you" should be regarded as relevant to a context in which the participants actually carry out symbolic interaction. The following passage, which is the opening paragraph of "The Skylight Room", is considered to be a variety of the first person narration though the first person pronoun does not appear at all.

First Mrs. Parker would show you the double

parlours. You would not dare to interrupt her description of their advantages and of the merits of the gentleman who had occupied them for eight years. Then you would manage to stammer forth the confession that you were neither a doctor nor a dentist. Mrs. Parker's manner of receiving the admission was such that you could never afterward entertain the same feeling toward your parents, who had neglected to train you up in one of the professions that fitted Mrs. Parker's parlours.

In fact, one would easily notice that O. Henry is especially characteristic in his use of "you" rather than "I". Similar use of the second person pronoun is found in "The Green Door", "The Coming-Out of Maggie", "From the Cabby's Seat", and so on.

Thus "I"s and "you"s, particularly "you"s, which O. Henry uses in abundance, imply a direct and personal role-relationship between the participants of communication.

A few more words should be added concerning such "you"s as are found in the above quotation. Note that the term "you" in the above example indicates the one addressed to, and, at the same time, a protagonist of the addressed story. Using the subjunctive mood, the author brings the "you" into the time-space of the addressed story. "You" are not only told of Mrs. Parker's house but personally brought into her house himself, and directly look around the house under the guidance of Mrs. Parker. In this way, O. Henry makes the "you" present in two realms: the realm of the instance de discours, and that of the fictive story. The "you" is divided into two, as well as the "I". In other words, the "you" is "intradiegetic", while it remains unnamed and has no concrete object. The "I" and the "you" in O. Henry's short stories stands on the same ground, in that they are both accessible to the addressing situation and the situation of the story addressed.

Next, the use of inclusive "we", the "we" meaning "you" and "I", is significant in regard to the tenor. Inclusive "we" shows that "you" and "I", the addresser and the addressee, form a kind of "nexus", which is a group of people unified with some group identity. Inclusive "we" makes "you" and "I" a category contrasted to "them". The use of inclusive "we" represents a strong tie between the participants of communication, and, more positively, strengthen the tie. Here are five cases in which

inclusive plural pronouns are employed:

So much of the hero's toilet may be intrusted to our confidence. . . Our next view of him shall be as he descends the steps of his lodging-house immaculately and correctly clothed; ("Lost on Dress Parade", 221)

But deep below our freckles and hay-coloured hair the unhandsomest of us dream of a prince or a princess, not vicarious, but coming to us alone. ("The Brief Début of Tildy", 225)

A hand organ---Philomel by the grace of our stage carpenter, Fancy---fluted and droned in a side street. ("The Caliph, Cupid and the Clock", 186)

When one loves one's Art no service seems too hard. That is our premise. ("A Service of Love", 58)

The story should end here. I wish it would as heartily as you who read it wish it did. But we must go to the bottom of the well for truth. ("Mammon and Archer", 137)(All emphases added)

The use of inclusive plural pronouns suggests a context in which a common perspective is shared between the "I" and the "you", or else it establishes a social relationship in which "you" are made to take the same standpoint as "I". Actually, in the first and the second cases, the addresser and the addressee share a "view" in the literal sense of the word. In the fourth example, it is obvious that the participants of communication are to share common sense and a value system. Thus the use of inclusive plural pronouns makes it explicit that the addresser and the addressee conform a nexus, and that the narrated story is a message transmitted within a nexus, which is inevitably associated with the common, shared knowledge of the nexus concerned.

Incidentally, some more evidences can be presented to show that O. Henry's narrator assumes a role of sharing knowledge with the narratee. For instance, the last paragraph of "The Gift of the Magi" begins with the following proverbial sentence.

The magi, as you know, were wise men---wonderfully wise men---who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. (25)

By inserting the phrase "as you know," the narrator motivates

the narratee to share information with him. The sentence implicitly purports the following message:

We take it granted that the magi were wise men . . .

Or we may further restate it in this way.

I know that you, as well as I, take it granted that the magi were wise men . . .

In the terms of speech-act theory, the illocutionary force of the phrase "as you know" can be made explicit in the above statement.¹²

Without the phrase "as you know," the implication of the sentence would be a solipsistic one. Carried to an extreme, it would mean:

I claim, whether you agree or not, that the magi were wise men . . .

O. Henry avoids such a self-righteous statement, and prepare the addressee for the "epilogue" of the story, allotting the role of a member of a nexus to the addressee and arousing in him a sympathetic attitude.

The next example shows a communal sympathy among the addresser, the addressee, and also the third person protagonist.

Sara left Gerard and Denys treed by a bear and listened. Oh, yes; you would, just as she did! ("Springtime à la Carte", 148)

This passage describes the scene that Sara stops reading where Gerard and Denys, the characters of the story she is reading, are treed by a bear. The last sentence reaffirms that the narrator, the narratee, and Sara the heroine share a common standard of behavior, for the implied meaning of the sentence is:

I take it granted that you take it granted that she, taking it granted, behaved that way.

We have seen, through the two cases above, that some utterances which reflect and enhance common perspective of the people involved in the situation are inserted in O. Henry's stories, strengthening consequently the nexal, communal relationship of the participants of communication.

Thirdly, such rhetorical devices as euphemism, coinage, and exaggeration should be studied as interpersonal components. O. Henry's tricky expressions contribute to form a collusive relation of the addresser and the addressee. These expressions function in the way Martin Joos' "ellipsis" and "slang" do; they are significant in "that the addressee, and insider, will understand what not everybody would be able to decipher."¹³ O. Henry's special use of language helps to form a nexal society with insider-feelings.

Let us examine several euphemistic expressions in "Between Rounds".

his size 9, width Ds(37)

a well-aimed coffee-pot full of a hot, black,
semi-fragrant liquid(38)

The first example refers to shoes, and the second suggests coffee. These euphemistic expressions may be considered to be ornamental or simply redundant, but they assure that the addresser and the addressee secretly understand what is not explicitly said, and they serve to promote insider-feelings between them. (By the way, they may also connote the humoristic role or attitude of the addresser.)

One could possibly name some stories that are particularly generous in use of collusive expressions. "Memoirs of a Yellow Dog" is one such example. One may almost declare that use of "inside" language itself is the point of that story. Let us go through just a few cases:

a genuine Pomeranian-Hambletonian-Red-Irich-Cochin-Chine-Stoke-Pogis fox terrier(111)

an anonymous yellow cur looking like a cross between
an Angora cat and a box of lemons(111)

When the products of Scotland were all exhausted
except the rye bread(116)

In the first example, the addresser gives unusual details of a mongrel as if he were speaking of a breedy dog. The second is an exaggerated metonymy of the yellow cur. The last one hints Scotch whiskey. The addressee takes pleasure in untangling all these linguistic tricks, as he comes to be in a collusive relation with the addresser. (The addressee also recognizes that the addresser is a funny, humorous person.)

Lastly, the nexal society of the participants of communication inferred from O. Henry's discourse may also be supported by the characterization of the protagonists typical of O. Henry. O. Henry's characters rest much on stereotypes; they reflect the way people commonly conceive of a member of a social group, and reassures the social image of the type. The addresser does not depict the details of the personalities, because he assumes that he and the addressee belong to a nexus and that the addressee is already familiar with the kind of people he is speaking of.

For example, the characters in O. Henry's second book The Four Million are typical, ordinary citizens of New York City. In this book, we meet some poor typists. A typical typist is: single, poor, hardworking, beloved and romantic. Take Miss Leeson in "The Skylight Room". She rent the skylight room of Mrs. Parker, works night and day, and yet is too poor to rent a better room. Being a charming little girl with long hair and large eyes, she is loved by the male roomers, while the tall blonde teacher Miss Longnecker and the shopgirl Miss Corn are jealous of her. She is so romantic as to name a star and talk to it.

Let us compare her with the famous "shopgirl" character, Dulcie in "An Unfinished Story". She again is living on a petty wage. She lives alone in a furnished room. She is also romantic, and decides to reject the invitation of the disgusted rich and chooses to be in love with the fictional General Kitchener in the picture. It is obvious that these girls are not realistic characters but representatives of common image of working girls in a big city. Stereotype image of working girls has many other features that are not explicitly mentioned in the story, and the addressee is expected to recall them all by the cues given in the stories.

It is not only female characters that are stereotypical. We may examine the young man in "The Furnished Room". He is the one scathingly criticized by New Critics Cleanth Brooks and R. P. Warren. They accused that the young man's motivation or state of mind is not clear because "O. Henry has told us very little about him except that he is young, has searched for his sweetheart for five months, and is tired."¹⁴ O. Henry does not deserve their blame when we take interpersonal function of the simple description of characters into consideration. The addresser takes a role of reminding the addressee of a ready-made image, instead of supplying him with full information of the figure. As a consequence, a communal relationship is inferred between the addresser and the addressee, and/or their shared social images are reenforced.

All told, we have found, in the language O. Henry employs, four major components of interpersonal dimension: The adoption of "personal" narration with the choice of the first and/or the second person pronoun and the use of inclusive "we", on the word level; linguistic tricks or rather overly rhetorical expressions, on the phrase level; and simple characterization dependent on stereotypes, on the discourse level. The tenor of the situation relevant to the linguistic features above is marked by direct, person-to-person relationship, with common perspective, knowledge, and value system. The social relation is kept close by being exclusive of non-members. In short, the tenor reflected in and inferred from typical O. Henry's short stories is a nexal one, which, together with related "field" and "mode", forms a "chatty", friendly impression.

NOTES

¹ Books in Print 1987-1988 and British Books in Print 1987 respectively list twenty-seven and six books written by O. Henry. In Japan, some famous stories of O. Henry are available in numerous annotated editions. Japanese translations are also easily obtained in major paperback editions. See also James Leslie Woodress, American Fiction 1900-1950, (Detroit, Mich.: Gale Research Company, 1974), 163, Mitsuo Nishimura, "O. Henry Bibliography in Japan," Bulletin of the Dept. of Humanities and Sciences, Nippon Univ., 8 (1959), 69-87., and I. R. Titunik, Preface, O. Henry and the Theory of the Short Story, by B. M. Eijkenbaum, (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Michigan Slavic Contributions, 1968).

² Thomas A. Gullason, "The Short Story: An Underrated Art," in Short Story Theories, ed. Charles E. May (Ohio Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 13-31.

³ Cf. George Steiner, "'Critic'/'Reader'," New Literary History, 10, No. 3 (1979), 423-452.

⁴ Fred Lewis Pattee, The Development of the American Short Story, (1923; rpt. New York: Biblio & Tannen, 1966), pp. 361-62.

⁵ Eñxenbaum, op.cit., p. 17.

⁶ M. A. K. Halliday, Language as Social Semiotic, (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), pp. 28-31.

⁷ V. N. Vološinov, "The Language of Everyday Life and the Language of Poetry," (Seikatsu-no Kotoba-to Shi-no Kotoba,) trans. Toshio Saitō, in Freudianism, (Freud-shugi), trans. Takashi Isoya and Toshio Saitō, (Tokyo: Shin-jidai-sha, 1979), pp. 225-240.

⁸ Halliday, op. cit. p. 113; pp. 142-5.

⁹ M. A. K. Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan, Cohesion in English, (London: Longman, 1976), pp. 43-51.

¹⁰ Emile Benveniste, "La nature des pronoms," in Problèmes de linguistique générale, Tom 1, Collection TEL, (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p. 251-52; 255-56.

¹¹ O. Henry, The Four Million, (n.p.: Doubleday, 1906), p. 47. Page numbers from this edition appear in parentheses after quotations; wherever the context does not make explicit the story from which the quotation is taken, the name of the story is included in the parentheses, as well.

¹² Cf. J. L. Austin, How to Do Things with Words, (Oxford Univ. Press, 1960).

¹³ Martin Joos, The Five Clocks, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), pp. 24-25.

¹⁴ Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, Understanding Fiction, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1959), pp. 95-96.