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*Poetic Effects*

by Adrian Pilkington, 2000. Amsterdam: Benjamins, pp. 209, ISBN 90 272 5091 X (pbk).

In *Poetic Effects* Adrian Pilkington proposes that Sperber and Wilson's (1986; 1995) relevance theory can help fill the explanatory gap between textual patterns and their potential aesthetic effects. Before applying relevance theory to poetic texts, Pilkington first presents his position with regard to literary theory. This position is not unproblematic, however, and therefore requires some discussion.

Pilkington contrasts two well-known, though somewhat old-fashioned, approaches to literariness: text-based and semiotic/structuralist approaches. Pilkington's allegiance is clearly to the former. In fact, his attack on structuralism is surprisingly harsh, even unfair. For instance, he fleetingly ridicules the structuralist custom of identifying binary oppositions in a text by criticizing, in a hypothetical example, the opposition between *sun* and *moon* because 'it can mean almost anything. It has been used to signal the following distinctions: male/female, strength/weakness, reason/emotion, constancy/ fickleness' (p.24). Unfortunately, Pilkington here misses the significance of the fact that traditionally the items of these pairs have been systematically correlated, so that investigating this opposition may not at all be the gratuitous exercise he makes it out to be.

Pilkington's fault-finding with Culler's (1975) 'reading conventions' also strikes me as prejudiced. He calls the seven conventions paraphrased from Culler's book 'vague and *ad hoc*', while the 'fiction convention' is even 'completely vacuous', and he concludes that the conventions 'clearly can form no part of a serious pragmatic account of literary communication' (p.25). Similarly, Pilkington rejects the work of reader-response theorist Siegfried Schmidt, who discusses literary reading strategies in terms of the aesthetic and polyvalence conventions (as opposed to the 'fact' and 'monovalence' conventions that characterize the reading of non-poetic texts; see e.g. Schmidt, 1991). Pilkington claims that neither Culler nor Schmidt presents 'the kind of proposals that can generate serious theoretical and empirical claims' (p.32). This is simply not true. Empirical work rooted in this tradition has been done for instance by Zwaan (1993), Steen (1994) and Forceville (1999), yielding non-trivial conclusions about the influence of genre on the interpretation of texts.

Pilkington appears to suspect the 'reading strategy' advocates of seeing as much poetic merit in an alliterating advertising catchphrase as in a Shakespearean sonnet, and of reducing 'aesthetic experience' to a routine application of a set of rules. But Culler's demonstration that a 'poetic' reading of a news

text results in different interpretations than a 'news' reading of the same text by no means implies that the former produces results that are as aesthetically satisfactory as a poetic reading of a poem. The convention that one should read the poem as fiction, for instance, only emphasizes that a poem is not to be read as an account of reality in the sense that a newspaper article can be read as such. This convention is of course already operative before one starts reading the poem, simply because its location (typically: in a poetry collection) helps cue it as such, and thereby activates certain potential meanings and downplays others. The either/or of 'conventions' versus 'text-internal effects' is a false dichotomy. Culler's (1975) own sensitive readings in his chapter 'poetics of the lyric' clearly suggest he would agree.

This unqualified rejection of Culler's (and Schmidt's) conventions is all the more surprising because, contrary to what Pilkington himself seems to think, the 'conventions' concept can very well be integrated into a relevance-theoretical approach. The sender in Sperber and Wilson's model after all aims at optimal relevance in the communicative process, and making transparent to what genre a text belongs is an immensely important factor in achieving relevance.

Pilkington's third chapter is 'devoted to outlining the cognitive pragmatic theory – *relevance theory* as developed in Sperber and Wilson (1986; 1995) – that might provide the framework for a genuine theory of literariness' (p.52). Pilkington begins by discussing the problems besetting Jakobsonian code models of communication. A major weakness of these models is that they take context as *given*. In Sperber and Wilson's inferential model the relevant context becomes manifest as part of the communicative process itself. Pilkington rightly points out that judging what contextual assumptions need to be made manifest to the addressee is the responsibility of the communicator; and this in turn means that the latter's intentions are crucial. This is an important assumption vis-à-vis literary theorists of the deconstructivist school, who see the addressee's freedom in the interpretation of, say, a poem as constrained by the interpreter's creative abilities rather than by the poet's intentions. Another element of Sperber and Wilson's theory that is essential for Pilkington's project is the distinction between strong and weak implicatures – roughly, strong and weak 'hints' at what interpretations could or should be derived by the recipient of the message. The weaker the implicature, the more its derivation is the recipient's own responsibility. Poets rejoice in proliferating formulations that spark off weak implicatures. Pilkington is right to show how relevance theory can be used to account for the freedom in interpretations of poetic texts – but ironically he does not realize that the proliferation of meanings triggered by poetry's weak implicatures is perfectly compatible with Schmidt's polyvalence convention.

The following chapter focuses on metaphor. Pilkington persuasively argues that relevance theory can readily accommodate the now generally shared rejection of the old idea of metaphor as a deviation from literal language, and he

shows that the notion of 'weak implicatures' aptly accounts for the indeterminacy of metaphorical interpretation. Some pointed criticisms are raised against the Lakoffian position, specifically against the overconfident claim (notably in Lakoff and Turner, 1989) that the cognitivist position can unproblematically deal with creative metaphors. Chapter 5, on 'schemes and verse effects', discusses stylistic deviations such as epizeuxis, metre, rhyme, and alliteration in poetry. All these devices draw attention to themselves, and thus in principle invite the reader to dwell on them. The extra effort pays off in corresponding extra 'weak implicatures'. The analyses as such should be comfortingly familiar to stylistics-oriented students of poetry. They may regret, however, that Pilkington so seldom ventures to give his own analyses (as in the fine passage on the 'pen is spade' and 'pen is gun' metaphors in Seamus Heaney's 'Digging') instead of heavily relying on those of others.

Chapters 6 and 7 are devoted to complex emotions, attitudes, and moods, which Pilkington correctly claims are as integral an aspect of poetry as its propositional components. He argues that rhetorical figures and verse features encourage exploration of the poetic context which has helped establish an atmosphere of mutually manifest intimacy between poet and reader. This in turn stimulates the reader to respond to situations in the real world with a more refined repertoire of affective states. Relevance theory accommodates these insights via the emphasis on poetic effects which, in Sperber and Wilson's words, 'create common impressions rather than common knowledge' (1995: 224). The latter part of chapter 7 takes Pilkington into the deep waters of the philosophy of mind literature on 'qualia', a term which 'refers to the phenomenal or qualitative aspects of experiences, to the "raw feel" of experience, or to "what it is like" to have particular experiences' (p.170). What matters here is that aesthetic qualia crucially have an affective dimension, but differ from emotional qualia in general in being more intense and precise. This intensity and precision is specifically evoked by poetic effects. Poetic effects invite the investment of greater effort and energy to construe contextual assumptions by combining the wide array of implicatures with experiences and memories from the addressee's personal life.

While I find Pilkington's argument about the role of poetic effects in aesthetic experience persuasive, it worries me that he nowhere precisely defines the concept that constitutes the title of his book, all the more so because he does not adopt, as one might easily surmise, Sperber and Wilson's definition. Pilkington restricts the use of the term to the weak implicatures occurring in literary texts, specifically poems. But Sperber and Wilson's description is broader: 'Poetic effects ... result from the accessing of a large array of very weak implicatures in the otherwise ordinary pursuit of relevance' (1995: 124) and their examples of poetic effects are not primarily from poems. Whether Pilkington likes it or not, the concept of poetic effects can be employed in a wide variety of texts (see Forceville, 1996).

It will be clear that I have mixed feelings about Pilkington's book. I like his demonstrations of how rhetorical language can trigger the subtle messages of weak implicatures, and the emphasis on the role of affect in interpreting them. I also feel sympathetic toward Pilkington's attempts to ground his stern passion for poetry in a model. But his poetry-loving side and his model-making side seem to be somewhat in conflict, and this affects the question of what readership his book aims for. On the one hand, analysts of literary style hoping to find a new approach aiding them in their text interpretations are bound to be disappointed, since this is not what relevance theory purports to do. Whatever I may disagree with in Green's criticisms, I think he is broadly right that 'anything that a relevance theorist can say about a literary text ... can be, and most probably has been, said by conventional literary criticism' (Green, 1997: 134). Although in their response, Pilkington et al. object to this observation (1997: 146), they basically agree with Green: 'relevance theory ... is *not*, and should not be, offered as a discovery procedure' (Ibid.: 141). Relevance theory only provides a model within which readings, and reading variations can be accounted for. But Pilkington's high claims for the role of poetry, combined with the evaluative tone in some analyses, might give the misleading impression that Pilkington *does* after all want to talk about poetry in its own right. While his analyses are valid, however, they do nothing more than *illustrate* what 'poetic effects' are; they are mostly neither new, nor do they depend on relevance theory for their persuasiveness. Thus, the reader interested in the analysis of poetry but indifferent to relevance theory will not find much use for the book.

On the other hand, Pilkington weakens his position as a relevance theorist, as I have suggested, by fiercely attacking the idea that literary 'conventions' and reading strategies might play a role in the appreciation of poetry. Moreover, although the relevance theory scholar from outside literature will find a good demonstration of 'poetic effects' in Pilkington's book, the application of that concept is a limited one. Pilkington's profound concern with the importance of poetry makes him jealously reserve the productive notion of 'poetic effects' for literature alone, thereby unduly restricting the ways in which relevance theorists might want to use it as an explanatory device in broader contexts.

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