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WHAT MAKES A GOOD PIECE OF POETRY: AN ATTEMPT AT SUBJECTIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract. One of the factors in the popularity of Michael Swan's poetry is a unique combination of a comparatively simple form and deep, subtle meanings that even an inexperienced reader cannot but sense. In linguistics, the phenomenon is dubbed implicitness. In Michael Swan's poetic texts, implicit meanings are generated through the violation of the maxims of the co-operative principle (conversational implicature) and/or through the use of specific techniques: simplicity of outward form, tropes, irony, attention to detail, contrast and opposition, repetition, punch line, the effect of the author's presence in the text or distancing from the content.

Keywords: Michael Swan, poem, implicitness, implicit meaning, author's intended meaning.

1. INTRODUCTION

The ambitious first part of the title above is an obvious sign of biting more than we can chew, which is why we feel it necessary to specify that the article will focus on the poetry of Michael Swan [7; 8; 10], a well-known linguist and a truly unique poet. According to Will Daunt, 'The beauty of Michael Swan's writing is the artifice beneath its deliberate simplicity. ... The careless may miss the rich seams of absurdity and irony'; according to Michael Swan himself, 'it is possible to write good poetry that is neither difficult nor boring'; and Oversteps Books states that 'he often finds humour a useful tool in dealing with seriously confusing universe' [7, back cover]. So an answer to the question *What makes a good piece of poetry?* seems to be obvious: simplicity of outward form that is 'neither difficult nor boring' combined with deep meaning, for which purpose the author may choose to employ humour, irony, and even absurdity.

However, this explanation is sufficient only if we understand the mechanism of conveying meaning through lexical and syntactic means, and such discourse characteristics as humor, irony, or absurdity. We will try to show that in Michael Swan's poetry this relationship between form and the author's intended meaning is grounded on implicitness as a key feature of literary discourse.

According to van Dijk, discourse is a complex communicative event; its aspects – (a) language form, (b) a person's knowledge of the world, their views, intentions, and goals, (c) interaction between the speaker or writer and the addressee – are inseparable; to comprehend discourse, a person needs linguistic competence, but they also use their knowledge of the world, knowledge of a particular situation, social, cultural, and some other kinds of knowledge [14; 15]. Good prose or poetry is interaction between the author and a reader, no matter how distant in terms of time, space, or culture

they are. It is partnership relations. Like in real-life communication, an addressee (a reader) has to do their share of work; it is a privilege of a reader to decode the author's signs and to discover the author's intended meaning. Implicitness is an inherent feature of both real-life communication and literary communication. It is implicitness that makes the quest for true meaning challenging and exciting. Implicit meaning is 'suggested though not directly expressed' [9], 'not explicit; implied; indirect; contained or inherent' [1], 'understood though not clearly or directly stated' [6]. According to Hasan, 'precise meanings become available only if certain additional conditions are met; the average working knowledge of a language is necessary but not sufficient' [4, p. 194-195]; 'Implicitness refers to the degree to which meaning is dependent on references to objects and events in the context of situation, while explicitness refers to the degree to which meaning is contained in reference within the text. An implicit style requires that the reader use the context beyond the text to varying degrees to interpret meaning' [5, p. 132].

Analyzing Michael Swan's poetry, we will also rely on the concept of conversational implicature because many of the author's works are dialogue poems or contain the characters' dialogues and monologues. The characters' speech style is conversational ('deliberate simplicity'); so Grice's classical theory of conversational implicature as a specific kind of inference based on the context of utterance, relevant contextual information, and the assumption that the speakers are co-operative [3] can help to interpret their intended meanings. A character's implicit meaning and that of the author may or may not coincide; that is why we will discuss Michael Swan's poems in terms of 'macrocommunication level, which denotes the author-recipient communication, and microcommunication level, which reflects the character-to-character communication' [13, p. 38].

2. HYPOTHESIS AND DISCUSSION

For the purpose of this article, we divide Michael Swan's texts¹ into three main types, each having its dominant feature:

- the characters address each other;
- the author addresses a reader directly or indirectly;
- the author withdraws from the scene.

Some of the poems belong to the grey area displaying features of two types.

The characters address each other. The style of the characters' speech is both poetic and colloquial (the best example here is perhaps *We Tried to Tell You*). We believe that the poetic aspect of the characters' speech – expressive means and stylistic devices – is the author's voice, a technique employed to address a reader (macrocommunication), which will be discussed later. As to the conversational aspect of the characters' dialogues, we have discovered that they could be quite successfully analyzed in terms of Grice's co-operative principle and conversational implicature. In the dialogues created by Michael Swan, we can find examples of violation of all the four maxims of the co-operative principle, which generates conversational implicatures; like in real-world communication, the characters understand each other's implicit meanings. Sometimes, the author creates a situation in which an addressee (a character) and a reader infer more than a speaker (another character) means to communicate. Consider the following example:

After the Talk:

*"I was interested in what you were saying
about inductive and deductive approaches
to grammar learning.*

¹ David Crystal believes that the terms *discourse* and *text* can be used in a broad sense: both can denote any language unit, spoken or written, if it has a clear communicative function [2, p. 116].

*I mean
how far can you maintain the opposition
between on the one hand
Bacon's paradigm of the scientific method
and on the other
Newtonian-type systems
in the light of all we have learnt
from Max Planck onwards?"*

*"Absolutely.
Anything one says in this area,
is, as you imply,
subject to the caveat
that hypothesis formation
is a two-way process
with a complex epistemological status.
Popper's good on this,
isn't he?
And wouldn't it be fun
to try out
a quantum approach to grammar?
Good to talk to you."*

Fifteen–love.

Using scientific terms and referring to various theories, the first speaker implicates the sophistication of his/her mind. At the same time, the violation of the maxim of Relation in his/her utterances (*inductive and deductive approaches to grammar learning, Bacon's paradigm of the scientific method, Newtonian type systems, Max Planck*) allows the addressee (and a reader) to conclude that the speaker is a boastful fool. The addressee (the author) mocks the addresser; violating the maxim of Relation (*Popper's good on this, to try out a quantum approach to grammar*), the maxim of Manner ("*... how far can you maintain the opposition...?*" – "*Absolutely.*"), the maxim of Quality (*Good to talk to you.*), he implicates his critical attitude towards the interlocutor and the content of his/her utterance. Thus from macrocommunication perspective, it is irony (consider also the author's comment *Fifteen–love*). More than once the author, who works in English language teaching and applied linguistics, has criticized pseudo-scientific and pseudo-literary claims.

The author addresses a reader. Sometimes, the author addresses his reader **directly**, in which case he uses personal pronouns, first-person narration, imperatives, expresses wishes, asks questions, etc. Consider, for example, the poem below.

On the Plus Side

I've forgotten the answer.

*Would you believe it?
All those years
tirelessly travelling
searching the archives
consulting authorities
tracking down eyewitnesses
collating the evidence –*

*all gone for nothing.
I've forgotten the answer.*

*On the plus side
I've forgotten the question.*

A distinguishing feature of such poems is the author's presence (*I've forgotten the answer. / Would you believe it?*) Their other conspicuous feature is irony. According to Sperber and Wilson's inferential model of communication, irony is the case of echoic mention; ironic utterances express a speaker's critical attitude towards what is said or expected [11; 12; 16]. In the poem above and in the one below, the punch line implicates the author's intended meaning: it may turn out that our ambitions are not worth the trouble.

How Everything Is

*Perhaps this is how everything is.
The scree steepens into a rockface;
you work your way up ten or twelve pitches,
each worse than the one before,
the last a brutal overhang
with few holds, and those not good;
somehow, pushing your limits,
you struggle through to the top
with your arms on fire,
to find a car park, toilets and a café.*

In *How Everything Is*, the author's implication is expressed through the semantic opposition: long and dangerous journey (*The scree steepens into a rockface; / you work your way up ten or twelve pitches, / each worse than the one before, / the last a brutal overhang / with few holds, and those not good*), painful journey (*pushing your limits, / you struggle through to the top / with your arms on fire*), as opposed to quick and easy ways of the civilized world (*a car park, toilets and a café*).

In other cases, the author addresses his reader **indirectly** – we regard expressive means and stylistic devices as evidence of the author's intention to express his attitude and feelings; readers are expected to infer the author's intended meaning. Many of Michael Swan's poems are based on tropes (*The Shapes of Things, Spare a Thought, Lance-Corporal Swan, Journey of the Magi, 700*, and others). The poem below is an example of conceptual metaphor:

Local Currency

*In hell there is a bar
where you can buy cooling drinks.*

*You can pay
in local currency.*

*There are three ways
to get currency in hell.*

*You can make the devil cry.
A fortune for each tear
if you can get it.*

*Or you can perform
an act of pure love.
This has never been done.*

*Or you can sell time –
add years to your sentence.*

*As your sentence is eternity
that should make no difference.
But the view in hell
is that one cannot be sure of this.*

Hope dies hard in hell.

Every single metaphor in this text – buying currency and cooling drinks in hell, making the devil cry, selling the time of your existence, performing an act of pure love and entertaining hope in hell – is a building material for the underlying idea: it is the force of hope that gives us strength to endure sufferings. *Contra spem spero*. The personal pronoun *you* implicates the universality of the experience. It takes time to create an associative array, to make the connection between this piece of general knowledge and the picture of getting currency in hell to pay for cooling drinks in the local bar. The comprehension process is difficult, but the author does not try to make it easier; he seems to trust a reader's intelligence.

The author withdraws from the scene. This type is represented by just a few poems: *The Fisherman's Daughter, A Legend of the Flood, Picnic*. In them, there are neither dialogues nor monologues of the characters, nor does the author express his attitude or feelings. He just tells a story, which is important in itself; no comment is needed.

Picnic

*Two old Jews
fell in love
on the way to the gas.
I mean it:
in love at first sight.
And they poured it all,
a lifetime of love,
into five minute's talk,
touching hands
under the clubs,
under the guards' clubs.
Talk
about how
they would go on a picnic
in his little car,
and she would pack chicken
and salads
and honey cake
and strawberries and chocolates,
and he would bring champagne,
and they would sit
and smile*

*and look at the river
and talk,
new lovers.*

*That was the end.
They went through the doors
then.*

The signs of the author's presence are minimal (the parenthetical remark *I mean it*, the metaphor *poured it all into five minutes' talk*, the epithet *a lifetime of love*, the repetition *under the clubs, under the guards' clubs*). The story acquires significance of its own, an artistic presentation of a historical fact, the Holocaust. It is a reader's general knowledge of the world history that helps them to infer the implicit meaning: the tragedy of the whole nation (*Two old Jews / fell in love / on the way to the gas*). The story is full of detail (*and she would pack chicken / and salads / and honey cake / and strawberries and chocolates*), which implicate the happiness of peaceful life. There are much more phrases and words with conventionally positive connotation (*fall in love, love at first sight, new lovers, touching hands; his little car, smile, talk* (contextual meanings); *picnic*, names of foods, *champagne*) than those with negative one (*on the way to the gas; under the clubs, under the guards' clubs; That was the end*). Another opposition – a temporal one (*a lifetime of love – five minute's talk*) – also implicates the author's meaning.

3. CONCLUSIONS

We believe that the main factor in the popularity of Michael Swan's poetry is his respect for a reader. The author trusts his reader to be intelligent and sensitive enough to recognize the historical and cultural allusions, to decode his signs and to comprehend his philosophy. For a linguist, it is equally important to understand the mechanism of communicating context-dependent and non-context-dependent meanings. One of the levels of this mechanism is implicitness, an elusive matter that has no markers of its own. We may speak of conditions necessary for the generation of implicit meaning, as it is the case with conversational implicatures. We may also speak of specific techniques that result in the emergence of implicit meanings such as simplicity of outward form, metaphor, irony, contrast and opposition, repetition, allusion, attention to detail, punch line. Finally, we hypothesize that evidence of the author's presence in a poem or his deliberate distancing from the content of a story he tells us may also create the effect of implicitness.

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Одна з причин популярності поезії Майкла Свона – це унікальне поєднання у його творах простоти форми з глибокою витонченістю змісту, що помітно навіть недосвідченому читачеві. У поетичних текстах Майкла Свона імпліцитне значення генерується внаслідок порушення максим принципу кооперації (конверсаційна імплікатура) і/або завдяки використанню певних прийомів, серед яких відмічаємо умисну простоту лексико-синтаксичної будови речення/висловлення, метафору, алюзію, іронію, деталізацію оповіді, контраст і протиставлення, повтор, кульмінаційний кінцевий рядок, створення ефекту присутності автора або його відстороненості від змісту історії, що розповідається.

Ключові слова: Майкл Свон, вірш, імпліцитність, імпліцитне значення, інтендоване значення.