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DEFAULT VALUES IN ALLEN GINZBERG'S *A SUPERMARKET IN CALIFORNIA*

The conception of modern schema theory as the specific organization of human knowledge and its use in comprehension is generally attributed to the Cambridge psychologist F. C. Bartlett¹. Nowadays schema theory is being extended beyond its original boundaries – cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence, and is widely employed in the analysis of poetic or literary texts (see, e.g., Semino²). In the present paper some tenets of schema theory are used for the inferencing of information from literary texts. The concrete task of the study is to show how differences in default expectations may contribute to the interpretation of a literary text. The explication of *A Supermarket in California*, given below, which is a part of the poem *Howl* by Allen Ginzberg, is not aimed at producing an overall analysis of the extract, but is intended to demonstrate the plausibility and validity of some concepts and techniques of schema theory for the interpretation of literary texts. This analysis does not imply that a schema-theory perspective is the only possible way for the interpretation of literary texts. On the contrary, the point is that different approaches to the analysis of a poetic text are complementary: the more techniques are used for the analysis of a poetic text, the more objective and efficient the analysis is.

The conceptual framework in the paper is mostly grounded on the conception of schema theory developed by R. C. Schank³ and R. P. Abelson⁴,

while the idea of image schema is due to G. Lakoff, M. Johnson⁵, and M. Turner⁶. Though these two groups of researchers use comparatively different terminological apparatuses for the description of schemata, their basic ideas on human cognition of reality either coincide or supplement each other. To avoid terminological ambiguities, I shall try, when possible, to use the broad term 'schema' as an umbrella term for various conceptions of cognitive structures in our memory.

From a schema-theory perspective, worlds generated by verbal texts are cognitive structures resulting from the interaction between reader and language of texts. A text world corresponds to schemata instantiated by the reader during the processing of a text and depends on the reader's background assumptions. Differences in the schemata processing of the same text by different readers lead to the creation of different text worlds. My analysis of the extract from the poem by Ginzburg will undoubtedly be biased as it will be based on my prior knowledge. But variations in the interpretation of a literary text are limited by the verbal structures and patterns of a concrete text that activate practically similar schemata at least in the representatives of Western culture. This is the reason why fictional or literary texts have generally the same message or controlling idea for their readers, especially if such texts are read publicly or professionally.

¹ BARTLETT, F. C. *Remembering: a study in experimental and social psychology*. Cambridge, 1932.

² SEMINO, E. *Language and world creation in poems and other texts*. New York, 1997.

³ SCHANK, R. C. *Dynamic memory*. Cambridge, 1982.

⁴ ABELSON, R. P. *Artificial intelligence and literary appreciation: how big is the gap?* In *Literary Discourse*. Berlin, 1987.

⁵ LAKOFF, G.; JOHNSON, M. *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago, 1980.

⁶ LAKOFF, G.; TURNER, M. *More than cool reason: a field guide to poetic metaphor*. Chicago, 1989.

It is common for the scholars who apply schema theory to the analysis of literary texts to claim that literary texts challenge conventional schemata. For instance, G. Cook introduces the notion of 'schema refreshment' to denote changes in the reader's schemata caused by poetic texts. Schema refreshment is due to 'discourse deviation' which is founded on linguistic creativity and results either in the creation of new schemata by the reader while reading a literary text, or in the establishment of new connections between existing schemata, or in the modification of old schemata. The idea of schema refreshment is not new. Cook himself admits that his conception of schema refreshment corresponds to the notion of defamiliarization or de-automatization, as introduced by the Russian 'formalists', and means linguistic creativity grounded on various deviations from codified language norms and a specific patterning of patterns which reflect the novel perception of reality⁷.

Each schema contains a number of variables whose actualization depends on the nature of the environment. The schema for BUYING, for example, has four major variables – a seller, a buyer, some merchandise, and a method of payment. Variable constraints have two main functions: they guide the comprehender's search for the entities that realize the variables of an active schema, and provide default values for variables that are not specified by a particular input. In contemporary life, for instance, money – in cash, in credit cards, or in cheques, and not the exchange of goods, as in barter – is the default method of payment within the BUYING schema, even if it is not explicitly stated. Communication crucially depends on shared expectations about default elements of schemata which include not only the default properties of a schema, but also default participants, default settings, and so on.

The dominating schema in *A Supermarket in California* by Ginzberg is activated by the title of the extract which contains the word

'supermarket'. A configuration of entities characteristic of the SUPERMARKET schema are easily found for its variables: 'wives', 'husbands', 'children' represent 'buyer'; 'the cashier' stands for 'seller'; 'peaches', 'bananas' may be matched with 'merchandise'. In this way the SUPERMARKET schema in the extract is instantiated, and it is activated from a customer's point of view: the speaking persona is a client and not a supermarket employee. At the same time the pre-existing cognitive structures in anyone's memory, acquainted with supermarkets, activate, for instance, such default entities as:

1. The usual aim of going to a supermarket is shopping;
2. One can find plenty of material goods (household and food-stuffs) in a supermarket;
3. Self-service is the general way to shop in a supermarket;
4. Money in cash or in credit cards is the typical means of paying for goods in a supermarket;
5. Shopping is customarily done by day in a supermarket;
6. Only living people buy goods in a supermarket.

These default elements of the activated SUPERMARKET schema are automatically included into our mental representation of the content of the text, and, very importantly, some of them are automatically contrasted to some elements in the text of the poem. In other words, predetermined, stereotyped entities that are characteristic of shopping in a supermarket do not correspond to the entities projected by the given text. Some of the discrepancies are as follows:

1. Whole families (including babies) are shopping;
2. Shopping is done at night;
3. Dead people are shopping (Garcia Lorca, Walt Whitman. Even if somebody's prior knowledge does not include this information, it can be deduced from the last paragraph of the extract where this idea is paraphrased.);

⁷ COOK, G. *Discourse and literature*. Oxford, 1994, p. 191–206.

4. Questions that do not directly pertain to shopping are put in the text: *Are you my angel? Which way does your beard point tonight?*

Such discrepancies establish unconventional connections between different areas of human experience: in Schank's terminology, we use 'reminding' whereby one object reminds us of another. Reminding serves as one of the expediencies for the exploration of human knowledge structures by means of setting up similarities between different areas of human experience. Memory structures based on similarities between different domains of human experience are called by Schank 'Thematic Organization Points' (TOPs)⁸. To note in passing, Schank's notion of reminding resembles the notion of apperception, as developed by A. A. Potebnya and L. S. Vygotsky⁹.

The notion of TOP is fruitful for the interpretation of poetic texts, for it may facilitate the understanding of how unreal or fictional worlds in literature are connected with the real or actual world. Owing to the discrepancies between the default values characteristic of the actual SUPERMARKET schema and some properties of a supermarket activated by the text, the world in the extract is perceived as taxonomically impossible or fictional, though the described situation is quite real in terms of human attempts to understand their place in the world and the world's real values. Hence, the TOP in the extract may be understood as the search for real human values.

In linguistic terms the notion of TOP is generally founded on metaphor, which serves as schema connection¹⁰. In the analysed text metaphor helps to map features from the source domain (a supermarket) to the target domain (real human values) projecting the less familiar or more opaque in terms of the more common and transparent. The SUPERMARKET schema

in the extract allows, by analogy with Lakoff and Johnson's¹¹ and Lakoff and Turner's¹² metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY, to surmise still another facet of human life, conceiving it as connected with shopping. This is possible because the metaphorical elements, activated by the SUPERMARKET schema, remind us of (in Schank's sense) or may be mapped onto the usual variables of this schema. In Lakoff and Turner's terminology¹³, buyers can be mapped onto living persons, the relations between buyer and purchase onto the relations between person and purpose, the qualities of buyers onto qualities of living people in general, the inference patterns (including default values) from the SUPERMARKET domain onto the LIFE domain. But this metaphor, expressing some similarity between human life and shopping, is rather general and abstract. It says nothing, for instance, about affective states that can be associated with the described events: whether they are negative or positive. This surface metaphor can be concretized through the explication of the default values the extract contains - - the deep metaphor is always based on inferring.

Taking into consideration the discrepancies between the default values normally characteristic of a real SUPERMARKET schema and the properties attributed to this schema in the text, it is possible to put forward at least two points concerning the comprehension of the deep metaphor in the extract. First, 'California' in the poem stands for all states in the USA, since 'the whole families, including babies, are shopping at night'. Second, the purchasing of physical entities constitutes the essence of life in America, which actually presupposes the dominance of material values over spiritual and moral ones.

The statement concerning the prevalence of earthly values in contemporary America is

⁸ SCHANK, footnote 3, p. 111-113.

⁹ VINOGRADOVAS, M. *Fictiveness of poetic texts*. Vilnius, 1997, p. 22-24.

¹⁰ SEMINO, footnote 2, p. 209-211.

¹¹ LAKOFF; JOHNSON, footnote 5, p. 61 ff.

¹² LAKOFF; TURNER, footnote 6, p. 63 ff.

¹³ LAKOFF; TURNER, footnote 6, p. 63-64.

simultaneously too weak and too strong. It is too weak because buyers nowadays are practically the same in different countries, and that is why the prevalence of material values is the idiosyncrasy of contemporary ethos and mores. This state of affairs in the actual world is due to various reasons, including also the expansion of 'American culture'. The statement is too strong, for it cannot be referred to all representatives of human race. The speaking persona, Walt Whitman, Garcia Lorca do not buy anything in the supermarket – *never passing the cashier*: the schema background information about the goal of going to a supermarket (default goal), which is the purchasing of material goods, is flouted. The three of them are looking for something immaterial or spiritual that does not exist in reality: *in my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went into the neon fruit supermarket, dreaming for your enumerations!* But people for whom the acquisition of material wealth is not a first life priority are unfortunately in a very small minority.

The short and rather simple analysis of the

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DEFOLTINĖS VERTYBĖS ALENO
GINZBERGO „SUPERMARKETAS
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Santrauka

Straipsnio tikslas – pademonstruoti, kaip kai kurios sąvokos ir metodai, naudojami schemas teorijoje, gali būti pritaikomi aiškinant grožinės literatūros tekstus. A. Ginzbergo „Supermarketo Kalifornijoje“ analizė akivaizdžiai rodo, kad metafora „GYVENIMO PRASMĖ – PIRKTI“ susieja realią SUPERMARKETO schemą su paties teksto generuojamą SUPERMARKETO schema. Metaforos, reiškiančios materialinių vertybių viešpatavimą šiuolaikiniame pasaulyje, prasmė gali būti suvokta tik kaip teksto defoltinių ypatybių interpretacijos rezultatas.

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: gilioji/paviršutiniškoji metafora, defoltinės ypatybės/vertybės, kognityvinė struktūra, literatūrinis tekstas, metaforinis ryšys, schema, tekstiniai pasauliai, žinių fonas.

extract from the poem by Ginzberg nevertheless clearly shows that some aspects of its message can be inferred only on the basis of schema-theory, especially on the basis of default values in a SUPERMARKET schema which the reader needs to activate in order to understand the deep content of the cognitive metaphor LIFE IS SHOPPING. Thus the phrase 'default values' has two readings: it denotes a specific entity in the semantics of fictionality, and it has a specific meaning in the explicated text signifying human aspirations that are only confined to material or earthly values.

To conclude, I should like to contend that it would be unjust to claim that the schema model perspective is a completely novel and original approach to the interpretation of literary texts. Throughout the present article I have been trying to show that a schema-theory approach to fictional literature is the development of the theory of tropes from a pragmatic point of view which offers a more formalized apparatus for the exploration of the category of apperception manifested in literary texts through metaphorization.

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Summary

In the present paper some tenets of schema theory are used for the inferencing of information from literary texts. The concrete task of the study is to show how differences in default expectations may contribute to the interpretation of a literary text. For this purpose, the analysis of Allen Ginzberg's *A Supermarket in California* is carried out. From a schema-theory perspective, worlds generated by verbal texts are cognitive structures, and a text world corresponds to schemata instantiated by the reader during the processing of the text that depends on the reader's background assumptions. Background assumptions, shared by the members of the same language community, are regarded as default values, and they include default properties of a schema, default partici-

pants, default settings and so on. Literary texts challenging conventional schemata establish unconventional connections between different areas of human experience: in Schank's terminology, we use 'reminding' whereby one object reminds us of another. Memory structures based on similarity between different domains of human experience are called by Schank 'Thematic Organization Points'(TOPs). TOPs in literary texts are often grounded on metaphor, which serves as schema connection. The SUPERMARKET schema in Ginzberg's *A Supermarket in California* allows us to surmise human life as shopping because of the metaphorical elements activated by the schema. This metaphor

expressing some similarity between human life and shopping is a surface metaphor since it is too general and abstract. The surface metaphor may be concretized through the explication of the discrepancies between the default properties normally characteristic of a real SUPERMARKET schema and the properties attributed to this schema in the text. Such concretization turns this surface metaphor into the deep one which signifies the prevalence of material values in the contemporary ethos and mores.

KEY WORDS: background assumptions, cognitive structures, deep/surface metaphor, default values, literary text, metaphorical connection, schema, text processing/world.

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