

A Cognitive-Stylistic Response to Contradictions

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Abstract: Teske's paper places structuralist emphasis on the meaningfulness of contradictions and explores how these contradictions may affect readers' processes of interpretation in postmodern fiction. While I agree with Teske's analysis of the function of contradictions in the experience of reading postmodern fiction, I introduce a cognitive-stylistic perspective which complements Teske's structuralist exploration of contradictions. I provide a linguistic analysis of a passage from *The Unconsoled* to demonstrate the usefulness of this complementary approach. I also consider how drawing on theoretical elements from cognitive stylistics as well as empirical approaches such as reader response may be useful in expanding Teske's innovative analysis of contradictions.

Keywords: Cognitive stylistics, contradictions, narratology, reader response

This discussion note offers insight from a cognitive-stylistic perspective. Cognitive stylistics is a discipline that draws from cognitive science, cognitive linguistics, and literary studies to analyse texts. My primary focus is on Teske's (2015) analysis of postmodern fiction. While I agree with Teske's structuralist emphasis on the meaningfulness of contradictions, I suggest that a cognitive-stylistic approach grounded in linguistic evidence would complement Teske's analysis.

Teske's paper explores the uses of contradictions in postmodern fiction and their influence on the works' meanings and readers' processes of interpretation. Citing that radical deconstructionism may lead to discounting meaning created by contradictions in fictional works, Teske claims that adopting a structuralist approach will allow this meaning to emerge. The results of Teske's analysis suggest that contradictions serve many meaningful purposes and generally do not prevent a reliable interpretation of the text. The second half of her paper focuses on deconstructionists' and Jacques Derrida's views on contradiction. Teske argues

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that the meaningful functions of contradictions in postmodern fiction may offer an opposition to deconstructionists' epistemic scepticism, that is, that art has no meaning at all. Finally, she compares and contrasts the structuralist approach with the Derridian (n.b. not the same as deconstructionist) view of contradictions. She notes that structuralism shares aspects of the Derridian account of contradictions, such as the metaphysical assumption of reality.

Teske notes that she makes a major assumption concerning art's cognitive function, which is that art models external or internal reality, and that it focuses on exploring the 'psychic experience' (7). As a cognitive stylistician, I agree with Teske that 'art can be taken as part of the human cognitive endeavour' (7). As exemplified through the words of literary critic I.A. Richards—'A book is a machine to think with' (1924:1)—literature can be seen as an extension of our human senses and cognitive faculties. Therefore, I share Teske's stance that the reader's cognitive interpretation and cooperation plays a big role in meaning creation. Readers are not passive vessels into which the text is poured; reading is a negotiate process. Thus, to discuss art's cognitive function, and a reader's experience of that function, a more in-depth discussion of cognition as a scientific concept is necessary. Cognitive stylistics draws on cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistics to explain the ordinary workings of language and the human mind. Adding elements from these fields such as the theory of attention or embodiment theory (see Stockwell 2009; Maiese 2011) to ground Teske's claims about cognition could help make her study of contradictions even more systematic. Furthermore, although Teske considers the general responses of readers to these postmodern texts, she does not sufficiently explore the text itself, that is, its linguistic features. I argue that to have a holistic view of a work, you must consider the context (the reader's background knowledge, emotions, location at time of reading, etc.), the text itself (words on a page, including their semantic, phonetic, and syntactic features), and how these elements interact to constitute the reader's experience. Although Teske's consideration of the overall plot and themes of the three novels is very thorough and usefully constitutes her list of the functions of contradictions, there is very little direct textual analysis.

Teske's lists of the functions of contradictions are useful, but as a cognitive stylistician, I feel that her analysis would be complemented by linguistic analysis of textual examples. Teske claims that contradictions trigger responses in readers, but these contradictions necessarily arise from the language of the text. The addition of a rigorous linguistic analysis that is transparent and replicable would strengthen Teske's already systematic approach to exploring the meaning-making potential of contradictions. While Teske's structuralist account has successfully explained *what* the contradictions mean, perhaps tying contradictions to specific stylistic features could help explain *why* and *how* a reader arrives at a certain interpretation.¹ In Teske's discussion of *The Unconsoled* (Ishiguro 1995), she touches upon several stylistic and narratological concerns, such as deixis, focalisation, and narrator reliability. Identifying the exact linguistic feature that gives rise to each stylistic effect might help provide objectivity to the analysis. For example, consider again this passage:

¹ As postmodern fiction is known for its deviant use of stylistic features, it has received a lot of attention in cognitive stylistics. See, for example, Hidalgo-Downing's (2000) analysis of negation in *Catch-22*, Gibbon's (2012) study of multimodality in *House of Leaves*, and Whiteley's (2010; 2016) analysis of reader responses to *The Unconsoled*.

I was just starting to doze off when something suddenly made me open my eyes again and stare up at the ceiling. I went on scrutinising the ceiling for some time, then sat up on the bed and looked around, the sense of recognition growing stronger by the second. *The room I was now in, I realised, was the very room that had served as my bedroom during the two years my parents and I had lived at my aunt's house on the borders of England and Wales.* I looked again around the room, then, lowering myself back down, stared once more at the ceiling. (*The Unconsoled*, Ishiguro 2005 [1995]: 16, my emphasis)

Considering the stylistic features of this passage, a few things are apparent. Firstly, the presence of the personal pronoun 'I' already creates the possibility of an unreliable narrator because he is able to trick the reader by withholding information or outright lying (Short 1996: 257–8).² Secondly, the use of deictic elements such as the temporal, proximal adverb 'now', coupled with the use of the distal past tense ('was', 'realised') and the adjective phrase ('that had served as my bedroom during the two years my parents [...] on the borders of England and Wales') help to create a contradictory feel. Not only is the tense conflicting (now vs. two years ago), the location is as well (hotel room in Europe vs. bedroom in aunt's house in Wales). These linguistic features reinforce what Teske indicates as the 'irregular experiences of place, time and people, conflicting with the reader's common sense' (8) that are found throughout the novel.

I think that Teske's innovative study of contradictions in postmodern fiction yielded some very interesting results. Her detailed lists of thematic functions of contradictions and heuristic uses of contradictions could be useful checklists for future explorations of contradictions in fiction. Furthermore, Teske mentions the aesthetic function of contradictions but does not expand on this concept, which she notes is 'less easily definable and not so vitally related to the meaning and interpretation of the text' (15). An exploration of the aesthetic function of contradictions would be useful to consider in terms of the reader's experience because aesthetics often affects readers' emotional responses to texts, and possibly their interpretations (see Stockwell 2009). Although the aesthetic function of contradictions has not been extensively considered to my knowledge, explorations of aesthetic and emotional responses to literary texts is a current area of research (see van Peer et al. 2007; Stockwell 2009, 2013, 2015; Whiteley 2011). Teske offers reader interpretations from literary critics to support her claims of the uses of contradictions; however, it would be interesting and worthwhile to pursue reader response studies that focus on untrained, or at least lesser trained readers, from sources such as *Goodreads* or local books clubs, which would be in line with current research in cognitive stylistics (e.g. Peplow et al. 2015; for a reader response study of *The Unconsoled*, see Whiteley 2010, chapter 6) and would provide a broader idea of reader responses to contradictions in postmodern fiction. Overall, I found Teske's analysis to be intriguing. This discussion note has aimed to introduce the complementary

² While not all I-narrators are necessarily unreliable, the nature of first-person narration always makes unreliability a possibility. Considering the example of *The Unconsoled*, there is a strong probability of an unreliable narrator due to the presence of the I-narrator mixed with inconsistent tense, deixis, and locations. It should be noted that possible unreliability is not the only effect of first-person narration— this type of narration can cause a personal relationship between the reader and the I-narrator, which leads to sympathy on the reader's part (see, for example, Leech and Short's (2007:213) analysis of first-person narration in *Lolita*, *Jane Eyre*, and *A Clockwork Orange*).

cognitive-stylistic approach to suggest a linguistic element to Teske's valuable structuralist analysis.

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