

Natural Complexity. From Language to Text to Tradition

Abstract: The major thrust of this article is to demonstrate the extremely complex nature of even the apparently simplest communicative events such as polite conversation at a railway station and illustrates how and why communication is complex. The text selected to elucidate the complex mental processing involved in producing and comprehending messages enables a second objective to be achieved, namely a reconsideration of the ‘meaning’ of the work of Agatha Christie, especially with regard to the socio-political analysis that might be carried out using the crime story as a vehicle and the ideological stance she takes in the light of recent research questioning the traditional view of Christie as a ‘solid’ representative of the Golden Age of crime fiction. Such a reconsideration involves examining factors such as context in its widest sense, genre, tradition and calls up the question of the nature and value of a work of ‘literature’, starting from the premise that *all* communication is complex.

Keywords: *crime, society, ideology, pragmatics, indirectness, implicitness, mental processing, genre*

Because of the woman at the cleaners, the sick child,
she wore the wrong green dress.
(Alice Munro, “Tricks”)

1. Introduction: Investigating Natural Language

Natural Language philosophy laid the theoretical foundations demonstrating that everyday language, or more in general communication, is an extremely complex process. Grice demonstrated effectively that much more is meant than what is said; Austin showed clearly how an utterance (U) has manifold levels of meaning and can concurrently perform more than one illocutionary and perlocutionary force; Sperber and Wilson showed the workings of the inferential engine in the uncovering of ‘hidden’ meaning; all these theorists produced contextual theories of meaning in the wake of anthropological research.¹ Context was seen initially as a given in which the speech event takes place and then as an emergent situation co-constructed by the speakers in the developing of the ongoing speech event. Discourse analysts² and genre analysts³ and Critical Discourse Analysts⁴ stress the importance of textual factors as well as dealing with ideological content. Behaviour and ideology cannot be fully investigated without bearing in mind the cultural dimension⁵ and the behavioural norms laid down by society, beginning with

¹ See Bronislaw Malinowski, *Coral Gardens and their Magic* [1935] (London: Allan and Unwin, 1978); Alessandro Duranti, *Linguistic Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1997).

² See Teun van Dijk, ed., *Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction. Volume 1: Discourse as Structure and Process. Volume 2: Discourse as Social Interaction* (London: Sage, 1997).

³ See Vijay Bhatia, *Analysing Genre. Language Use in Professional Settings* (London: Longman, 1993).

⁴ See Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power* (London: Longman, 1989).

⁵ See Ron Scollon and Suzanne W. Scollon, *Intercultural Communication*, Second Edition (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2001).

politeness.⁶ Conversational analysts⁷ examine the structure of conversation with regard to the rules governing turn taking and other organizational principles.

However, analysing a text employing these methodological approaches does not do full justice to the richness of meaning conveyed by that text. Analysis may be piecemeal, revealing only certain features of the text and not its entirety. Hence, this paper will engage in a stylistic analysis of an extract from a novel. An entire section (the first of the two sections constituting the first chapter of the novel) has been selected in order to have a significant, ‘complete’ ‘text’ and not just a short snippet, so that factors such as context, co-text and discoursal features may be seen at work.

The text selected comes from Agatha Christie’s *Murder on the Orient Express*. The reasons motivating the choice are a) the language is ‘simple’, b) the concepts are simple, (concrete *hic et nunc* objects and daily events), hence there would appear to be no immediately discernible obstacles to full comprehension, c) it is a crime novel, a genre which until recently both theory and the ‘man in the street’ deemed was not serious literature, and it therefore did not contain any ‘deep’ concepts or issues requiring contemplation and (critical) re-reading, unless one wished to reiterate the pleasure and escapism it provided. The selected extract thus offers a tangible illustration of just how complex the most unassuming text can be. For reasons of space, the first paragraph will be analysed in some depth, (part 2 of this paper), while the rest of the section will receive detailed but not extensive attention (part 3 of this paper). However, the section which I have classified as ‘small talk’ (sentences 23-52) will receive only passing attention since it is less varied in technique.

Parts 2 and 3 will concentrate basically on sentence level, hence sentential and sub-sentential meaning. Part 4 will extend the analysis from the sentential and sub-sentential level to the level of text and discourse. The analysis will thus be pragmatic and stylistic. Instead, section four will approach the broader questions set in this volume such as how genre affects the message and the issue of the relationship between pragmatics and aesthetics. Naturally, there can be no divide between the levels. They constitute means of approaching text analysis, which has to start somewhere and somehow. Independence of levels is non-existent. It is simply a useful heuristic tool. Hence, the early sections focus more on micro-meaning and its relation to macro-structure while the fourth section does the opposite. But it is merely a question of degree. The final section, (5), draws conclusions. Those drawn from sections 2 and 3 are ‘definitive’, so to speak, and therefore not reiterated, while those drawn from section four are tentative since they point to possible macro-interpretations of the Christie’s. They thus indicate areas of possible future investigation.

2. Plumbing Complexity – The First Paragraph

[1] It was five o’clock on a winter’s morning in Syria.

The locutionary force of Sentence [1], (henceforth S1) is that of describing a state of affairs, namely establishing time at a certain geographical location. However, this Austinian description, while correct, (or viable),⁸ identifies very little of the manifold communicative functions performed by S1, which will be unfolded as we proceed. It thus demonstrates that classic Austinian theorising on speech acts identifies only one of the ‘meanings of meaning’,⁹ to paraphrase Ogden and Richards. (Note that the illocutionary

⁶ See Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1987).

⁷ See Emanuel Schegloff, *Sequence Organization in Interaction* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2007).

⁸ A critique of pragmatic theory is not a remit of this paper. My objective is to apply pragmatic and stylistic theory to reveal the great complexity and multifacetedness of messages and communication. I thus take the theories employed as operationally viable and effective.

⁹ See Charles K. Ogden and Ian A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1923).

and perlocutionary forces of S1 will be dealt with below). First of all, speech acts constitute low level generalisations. Namely, they pinpoint conceptual meaning at the level of sentence/utterance. They are generally devoid of context and co-text, two crucial sources of information which help the reader comprehend the text. Secondly, they fail to recognise two levels of meaning: on the one hand, micro-levels (sub-sentential meaning), and on the other hand, macro middle and high levels of generalisation (supra-sentential or discoursal meaning).¹⁰ Third, they may fail to recognise a myriad of other types of meaning, such as recognising focaliser, point of view and attitude. Such ‘failings’ are, of course, not intended as a criticism, since classic speech act theory does not claim to perform all of these functions. Theoretical constructs such as those listed in the introduction have been developed to probe these domains. Let us examine the micro and macro levels in turn.

Sub-sentential meaning can be crucial in creating implications and implicatures. In S1 the first piece of information is highly specific, namely time: “five o’clock ... morning”, the second piece of information is relatively specific – “in Syria”¹¹ – while the third piece of information “a” is generic. Presenting information as generic in a U where other information is presented as specific is a linguistic device which indicates that (in principle) the author is signalling that that information is less important than the information conveyed precisely. Stated differently, the author is conveying to the reader through this specific linguistic selection that the exact day on which the action takes place is not particularly important. Note that this explanation does not include the reason why such information is deemed to be less important by the author. In contrast, the exact time, 5 o’clock in the morning, and the fact that it is a winter morning, are flagged as being extremely important. Here too, no reason is specified to account for importance. However, the reader can ‘fill out’ part of the implicit meaning by relating such information to his knowledge of the world (the standard way comprehension is achieved): Syria in winter is extremely cold. This mental operation of induction based on knowledge of the world helps explain why the precise location is not relevant, in Gricean terms, that is to say, why it is not relevant to the author/narrator’s communicative goal: the relative location considered together with the time of the year are sufficient to imply a very low temperature.

We have thus introduced another dimension of ‘meaning’, the value of information,¹² and in so doing we have employed a sliding scale, or gradation – the relative importance of each piece of information in relation to the other pieces of information in the U (and in co-text).

Yet another domain which is also of great significance in any text, and especially so because it often escapes the reader’s notice, is information that is missing. In this case, given the relatively great precision of the contextual information, it is noteworthy that the year in which the action takes place is withheld. The significance of this will be considered two paragraphs below.

Once such basic facts about the linguistic make-up of the text have been established, the questions which then require an answer are why the writer/narrator assigns the values he does assign to each piece of information in a given linguistic unit and why certain information is provided while other information is suppressed. Answering these questions is tantamount to examining the operation of Grice’s Cooperative Principle, especially the maxims of Relation (or Relevance) and Quantity.¹³

However, Gricean maxims cannot operate in isolation. This being the first U in the novel, one of its functions is to establish context. This immediately takes us from sub-sentential level to the supra-sentential level. First of all, Syria takes us to the Middle East. Second, this fact should be related both to

¹⁰ See John Douthwaite, *Towards a Linguistic Theory of Foregrounding* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell’Orso, 2000).

¹¹ Again, I must beg the reader’s indulgence, since from a strict theoretical standpoint, “at five o’clock in the morning” is not necessarily exact (was it 5 o’clock and zero seconds?), and so is not necessarily more precise than “in Syria”. However, the communicative effect is that time appears to be more precisely specified than location. Perfection is not of this world, nor of pragmatics, given the nature of language and of mental processing (Ibid.).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard U.P., 1991).

the title of the novel, *Murder on the Orient Express*, and to the fact that the train will be blocked in a snowdrift between Vincovi and Brod, i.e. the main action takes place in the Balkans. In order to achieve ‘full comprehension’ (a chimera, in an absolute sense, given the complexity of communication), this information should be related to our knowledge of the world - in this specific case to the fact that the novel was written between 1925 and 1933, namely 10-15 years after the end of World War I, which was ignited in the Balkans (!) by a young Serbian nationalist assassinating Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in Sarajevo in 1914. In conclusion, the theme of Orientalism seeps through well before Said persuasively brought Western attention to this explosive issue, an issue which is of central concern to world politics even today, the name Sarajevo constituting conclusive proof of this view. Naturally, the broad statement that Orientalism, hence Alterity, are key components in this ‘detective story’ is not justified by the one sentence, but reading on in the novel will bring forth far greater evidence in support of this thesis.

The argument illustrated above begins to explain the relevance of the opening sentence to the novel as a whole. If we now turn to the suppression of the year in which the action takes place, then we may hypothesise that inference drawn above from contextualisation, (that is to say, from the date of publication of the novel), namely the action is set not long after the World War I, then this too forms part of contextualising the novel, as will be confirmed later.

Contextualisation is crucial in helping to identify the ideological framework that the novel evokes and which plays its determining role in motivating thought and behaviour. To anticipate just one example of what will gradually emerge, when the crime is discovered and the passengers realise they might be stuck in the snow for days, the ‘illuminated’ and highly opinionated Mrs Hubbard makes her voice felt in her customary manner:

“What is this country anyway?” demanded Mrs Hubbard tearfully.

On being told that it was Yugo-Slavia, she said:

“Oh! One of these Balkan things. What can you expect?”¹⁴

Returning to speech act theory, it should be remembered that while Austin developed speech act theory to elucidate the workings of oral communication, later scholars have successfully applied his theory to written communication. As stated above, I have, at this stage, only dealt with locutionary force. Illocutionary and perlocutionary forces have yet to be explicated. Two major reasons account for this fact. First, so far I have been examining only sub-sentential and supra-sentential meaning. Secondly, the opening sentence provides insufficient information to enable illocutionary and perlocutionary acts to be identified: a) no addressee has been identified so it is not possible to assign illocutionary and perlocutionary forces, b) the default addressee at this stage can only be the reader, c) insufficient information is provided by S1 to enable the inferential engine¹⁵ to extrapolate illocutionary and perlocutionary forces. What I have suggested, is that the sub-sentential information provided has the aims of beginning to create context and of setting mental processing working, including the key cognitive operation of triggering prediction.¹⁶

A third crucial function of (the sub-sentential components of) the opening sentence is to motivate the reader to continue reading by arousing his curiosity. Moreover, this is a general function of any text. Clearly, one strategy writers employ to achieve this goal in text types such as detective stories is to furnish limited, imprecise information to prompt the brain into thinking. This hypothesis may be instantly confirmed by turning to the title to the chapter, “An important passenger on the Taurus Express”

¹⁴ Agatha Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 58.

¹⁵ See Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* [1986] (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1995); Douthwaite, *Foregrounding*.

¹⁶ Douthwaite, *Foregrounding*.

that I (deliberately) failed to comment on initially. Christie's first words violate manner (sub-maxim: avoid obscurity), intentionally provoking the reader to unconsciously ask himself the key questions "Who is the "important passenger" and why should he/she be on the Taurus express?" in order to capture his attention from the word go. Note also that "the Taurus Express" also begins to depict the social *milieu* in which the story is set.

We now continue our analysis of what I termed above the 'sub-constituents' of meaning by moving on to S2.

[2] Alongside the platform at Aleppo stood the train grandly designated in railway guides as the Taurus Express.

"Alongside the platform at Aleppo" situates the action at a train station. From this the reader infers that at least some of the action will probably take place in the open air. Relating the new information to the old results in the inference that the sensation of cold is intensified: being in the open air at five o'clock on a winter's morning in Syria will not be very pleasant for the characters involved. At a cognitive level, such information activates schemata¹⁷ that prepare the reader to comprehend quickly the text that follows.

Introducing the second sentence thus demonstrates that texts exhibit both cohesion and coherence,¹⁸ two linguistic phenomena which help structure the text and facilitate comprehension. For instance, the reader does not even for a second reflect on the fact that introducing "Syria" in S1 means that the reader takes for granted that "Aleppo" introduced in S2 is a town in Syria and that the information has been effortlessly expanded into something more precise. Technically speaking, "Aleppo" is a cohesive item linked to "Syria", and the mental operation of recognising this link is carried out unconsciously, and above all, unquestioningly, which is directly connected to the next point.

Secondly, it should also be noted that Aleppo is, essentially, a duplication of "Syria". Cohesion, in the form of substitution on the paradigmatic axis with a member of the same class, (proper name: "Aleppo" for "Syria"), is employed to make essentially the same concept appear as novel and not as boring repetition, which would risk a reduction in motivation to read on.

The mention of Aleppo should also trigger our knowledge of the world concerning that town. Aleppo is one of the oldest continuously inhabited towns in the world, it was the third largest city of the Ottoman Empire, it was a key town in the Silk Road, after World War I it ceded its northern hinterland to modern Turkey. This skeletal outline illustrates the point that Aleppo is at the 'heart' of the Orient.

Two consequences of this analysis are important.

First, the 'Western' murder described in the novel is committed in the Orient, not in the West. It should not be forgotten that colonisation involved a great deal of 'violent' Western activity, much of which was condoned when not actually justified by the West itself for obvious reasons.

'Condoning' in crime novels is especially easy since the genre is considered by many to be lowbrow and escapist and thus devoid of 'serious' content which is supposedly the preserve of high-brow literature. Hence, there is nothing to 'condone'. Everything is as 'natural' as can be, nothing is questioned.

Stated differently, the reader's prior attitude to the text will determine in great measure the way he interprets the text. To illustrate this precept, take winter. This season plays symbolic functions in our culture – death, desolation, destitution, both physical and moral/metaphysical (to give just one example, think of Yeats' "The Second Coming" and, more directly, "The Journey of the Magi").¹⁹ Yet a reader

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ See Michael Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan, *Cohesion in English* (London: Longman, 1976).

¹⁹ The first stanza reads as follows:

who believes crime novels function exclusively as entertainment will not envisage such links. However, Christie's crime fiction is intensely moralistic and ideological. It is also replete with intertextual This latter point in itself should suffice to set off a critical reading of Christie's oeuvre.

Ultimately, crime, by definition, is based on ideology, for criminal activity represents what a given society judges as evil and is rooted in the socio-economic conditions of its time. In addition, the action which society takes to deal with crime is equally revelatory of social values. Hence, even those crime novels which one might judge as pure escapism still perform a social function, and must be judged as such. The critical literature on the subject abounds and I will refer the reader to four of the many significant works in the field: Knight (1980), Mandel (1984), Kayman (1992), Pepper (2016).²⁰

Thus, committing the murder in the Orient is not simply a clever plot hatched to avoid detection, (geographically distant from where the murdered man would be more quickly recognised – had Poirot not been on the train!), for instance, but also evokes colonialism, no matter how indirect that link might at first appear.

The link between colonialism and detection, though not necessarily immediately obvious, is a strong one.²¹ It must be borne in mind that Poirot shares with the classic figure in crime detection – Sherlock Holmes – the feature of being infallible.²² They are part of the same social system. Infallibility has many consequences, one of which is crucial here. Poirot will take upon himself the responsibility of 'condoning' the crime, once he has discovered identity of the murdered man, of the perpetrators and of their motive in committing the crime. He thus acts, as does Holmes, as public prosecutor, judge and jury all in one and emits the final sentence.²³ This dominant behaviour is, in the final analysis, based on the very same ideology that was offered to justify colonialism – the dominator acts in the name of the supposed good of the dominated. (One might wish to recall that perhaps the worst example of colonial exploitation was King Leopold's Belgian Congo). Thought and action cannot be divorced from the socio-historical and ideological context in which they occur.

The second consequence of activating our knowledge of the world concerning the Balkans is that it helps remind us that the history of that part of the globe still plays a central role in modern life. The 'Arab Spring' followed by the Syrian war (2012-2016), to 'modernise' the argument, the game being played in the region by the 'great powers' are all consequences of a socio-political situation with very

A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.

²⁰ See Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1980); Ernest Mandel, *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story* (London: Pluto Press, 1984); Martin A. Kayman, *From Bow Street to Baker Street: Mystery, Detection and Narrative* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992); Andrew Pepper, *Unwilling Executioner. Crime Fiction and the State* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2016).

²¹ See, for instance Mukherjee who argues that the discourse on crime was one of the instruments employed by the British in India to dominate the colony (Upamanyu Mukherjee, *Crime and Empire*, Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2003). See also Douthwaite, "The Social Function of the Detective Fiction of the Golden Age", *Lingua e Diritto. La Lingua della Legge, la Legge nella Lingua*, *Publif@rum*, 18 (2013), http://publiforum.farum.it/ezone_articles.php?art_id=263, 13/03/2013.

²² Knight (1980) provides a partial discussion of how Christie fits into the mainstream of the genre.

²³ Literally speaking, Poirot leaves the final decision up to the Director of the railway company. However, this act of 'abdication' is humbug, since Poirot knows full well what the Director's decision will be! At the lowest level of motivation, the Director has no wish to cause a scandal and the unpleasant consequences it would have for the railway company – social mores and economic interests lie at the heart of social behaviour. (See the reference to *Nostramo* later in this paper.) Returning one moment to Christie's moralistic stance discussed in the previous paragraph, one might also note here that the murderers are twelve – again public prosecutor, judge, jury and executioner. Given the nature of the victim, Poirot 'condones' the crime. Taking the law into one's own hands is a recurrent theme in crime fiction and is at the core of the ideological debate on the nature of law and law enforcement.

deep historical roots. The ideology which Christie conveys²⁴ in the novel is in the mainstream of the Western tradition.

Returning to indirectness and sub-sentential meaning, in a similar vein to the manner in which geographical location is ‘expanded’, the reader is not explicitly informed that the action opens in a railway station. However, the lexeme “platform” connected to the proper name “Taurus Express” make this inference unavoidable as well as unconscious – child’s play in fact. Nonetheless, the condensed analysis offered up to this point should hopefully be sufficient to prompt the conclusion that all the linguistic analyses outlined so far are anything but superficial and trivial. They only appear to be such since the brain does all the processing involved unconsciously and effortlessly. The introduction of the “Taurus Express” does not simply provide the reader with specific information concerning means of transport – the literal function of the linguistic expression. It does much more. Again establishing context is crucial, for it introduces the domains of the social and cultural background of the participants in the novel, and in the first instance, social class. The trains run by the *Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits*, of which the Taurus Express which Poirot first takes and the Orient Express on which he continues his journey were not for the penniless. This anticipates the line-up of (‘Western’) characters that will be found on the Orient Express and that make up the socio-economic, historical, political and ideological backdrop of the novel and which determine its ‘ultimate’ or ‘ideological’ meaning.

Indeed, perhaps the most important function of Chapter 3 is to present the characters to the audience, their social and geographical origin constituting the crucial factors in building a ‘portrait of that Western’ society which condemns the Italian *Mafioso* to death.

Before continuing, a central point must be made: everything that has been said and argued so far is based on the presupposition that Christie’s selections are ‘motivated’, in the Russian Formalist sense of the term.²⁵ They are neither chance selections nor lucky selections, but are pondered because they are intended to create specific effects, to convey one or more non-literal meanings. This further presupposes that Christie is a ‘good’ writer, that is to say, one who is in control of the means of writing and who is producing far more than what was originally considered to be low brow literature of little value. It is only if this premise is recognised as valid that the critic can explain the (Gricean) relevance of Christie’s selections, or, to put it differently again, accept my interpretations as valid or potentially valid.

We now return to the micro-analysis to make two central points. First, S2 is constructed employing inversion, namely it exhibits the syntactic structure A-PRED-SU²⁶ in lieu of the standard SU-PRED-A, namely:

[2] Alongside the platform at Aleppo stood the train grandly designated in railway guides as the Taurus Express.

[2a] The train grandly designated in railway guides as the Taurus Express stood alongside the platform at Aleppo.

Inversion removes “The train” from informationally-strong thematic position²⁷ thereby diminishing its value as information while concurrently fronting the prepositional phrase performing the function adverbial. (Note that we have returned to the concept of information value, with another means of signalling value, syntagmatic position in the clause). However, in this case the prepositional phrase does not become more important information by dint of occupying thematic position. Instead it performs a

²⁴ Note that ‘conveys’ does not entail ‘shares.’

²⁵ See Douthwaite, *Foregrounding*.

²⁶ A = Adverbial function, Pred = Predicate, SU = Subject.

²⁷ See Michael Halliday and Christian Matthiessen, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (London: Arnold, 2004).

staging function,²⁸ as if it were given information.²⁹ Inversion also means that “Aleppo”, which would occupy end focus³⁰ in the ‘normal’ version is moved to the ‘middle’ of the sentence, thereby losing value as information,³¹ while “the Taurus Express” comes to occupy end focus and is thereby flagged as important information. This foregrounded construction³² constitutes one piece of linguistic evidence for the various contextual-ideological features outlined above.

The second central point starts from the realisation that S2 flouts the Gricean quantity maxim by providing more information than strictly necessary to convey the basic conceptual content transmitted by S2, whose essence may be illustrated by 2b:

[2b] Alongside the platform at Aleppo stood the Taurus Express.

Stated differently, what has to be accounted for is the presence, hence the relevance, of the postmodifying non-finite clause “grandly designated in railway guides as”. The clue lies in the adverb “grandly”, which performs a (negative) evaluative function and thus conveys someone’s point of view. There being no characters as yet present in the text, then the evaluation must be that of the 3rd person narrator. This in turn enables “designated in railway guides” to be identified as irony, if not sarcasm, performing the illocutionary force of criticising railway publicity, if not the railway itself, (a point which will be recur). Note that this in no way detracts from the class aspect mentioned above, for even if the said train is not so ‘grand’, the cost of the ticket places it beyond the financial reach of the have-nots.

Instead, the central point is that the narrator subterraneously intrudes in the novel from the very start, in this case by expressing narratorial/authorial stance, and must therefore be considered a participant to be constantly borne in mind in interpreting the novel.

It is, furthermore, a typical feature of Christie’s writing, a device she employs in order to align the reader with her own world view (or to ‘pander’ to whom she thought was her target audience – as we shall see, the question is still open).

[3] It consisted of a kitchen and dining-car, a sleeping car and two local coaches.

The illocutionary force of S3 is to furnish an explanation/justification to the negative value judgement expressed by the narrator in the non-finite clause in the preceding U. The addressee is thus the reader.³³ Again, the language is indirect. We infer that the train is short (only four coaches). Note that ‘short’, ‘only’ and ‘four’ are employed as negative modalisers here,³⁴ the adjective ‘short’ and the numeral ‘four’ being culturally based, as well as metaphorical (the conceptual metaphors SHORT IS BAD and GOOD IS MORE). Two coaches are “local”, from which we infer the passengers will not belong to the social elite travelling to the West in the “sleeping car”. Note again, “local” pitted against “sleeping” constitutes a covert method of establishing social status. Turning to numbers, not only is the train “short”, but of the four coaches, two are “local”, one is the “kitchen and dining car”, leaving only

²⁸ See Gillian Brown and George Yule, *Discourse Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1983).

²⁹ See Halliday and Matthiessen, *Functional Grammar*.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ See Douthwaite, *Foregrounding*.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ The reader might find my insisting on what he deems an obvious point strange. However, as we shall shortly discover, Christie is a skilful manipulator of the modes of speech and thought presentation and it is not always immediately obvious who the focaliser is. Furthermore, establishing this fact is crucial to determine illocutionary and perlocutionary forces, as stated above.

³⁴ See John Douthwaite, “A Stylistic View of Modality”, in Giuliana Garzone and Rita Salvi, eds., *Lingue e Linguaggi Specialistici* (Roma: CISU editore, 2007) 107-156; John Douthwaite, “Using Speech and Thought Presentation to Validate Hypotheses Regarding the Nature of the Crime Novels of Andrea Camilleri”, in David Hoover and Sharon Lettig, eds., *Stylistics: Prospect and Retrospect* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 143-167.

one coach carrying high status passengers. The reader will hopefully pardon this extended explanation, but it should not be forgotten that what I have just described are mental operations triggered by linguistic mechanisms and which take place in a totally automated, unconscious fashion. We are never aware of the complexity of what appears to be the simplicity of our thoughts and deeds.

A final reason justifying the need for detailed explication is that if we now read the title and the first paragraph all in one go without stopping to ponder over the considerations that have been offered above, then all the important sub-sentential meanings I have identified go by the board, since the basic impression is that we have a trite first paragraph which simply tells us we are at a railway station in a foreign land early one bitterly cold winter morning, thereby prompting the question “Why six pages of explanation? What’s all the fuss about?” While I have been talking about ‘important matters’ such as mental processing, colonialism, class and ideology, the conceptual content of the sentences analysed seems ‘miserly’. The writing seems to deflate everything into the mundane, the insignificant. (The issue of questioning my method will be taken up later).

3. Extending the Analysis – The Remaining Part of the Extract

[4] By the step leading up into the sleeping-car stood a young French lieutenant, resplendent in uniform, conversing with a small lean man, muffled up to the ears, of whom nothing was visible but a pink-tipped nose and the two points of an upward curled moustache.

S4 is one long sentence realising the entire second paragraph, in itself a signal of the importance of the paragraph. It introduces the two main characters in the chapter, one of which is our ‘hero’ Poirot. What is crucial here is not so much the fact that the text presents two characters, but *how* they are presented and the significance this will have for the rest of the novel, especially regarding Poirot.

Like S2, S4 employs inversion (standard would be: ‘a young French lieutenant, resplendent in uniform, stood by the step leading up into the sleeping-car, conversing ...’). Again the linguistic mechanism is employed to stage the information. First the French lieutenant is introduced (colonialism again, since the action is set in Syria, evoking, specifically, military power), and, crucially, is evaluated by the narrator (“resplendent”). Here too quantity is flouted since too much information is provided (“young” and “resplendent in uniform”), especially when one considers that this is the first and last time the character will appear in the novel and his role in the main action is non-existent.

Subsequent co-text helps recover the implicatures – the lieutenant is proud of his role and is trying to do his duty to the best of his abilities in order to further his career. Hence what appears to be objective, external, physical description, (“resplendent in his uniform”), is actually a way of conveying the character’s attitudes and goals. The fact that no name is provided indicates that what is important is not the individual identity of the person, but his social constitution. He is symbolic of a certain sector of his society. The fact that he is proud of what he is doing signifies he accepts and lives by the beliefs of the dominant society. One might also note the ever so gentle fun the narrator is making of the military man confirms authorial/narratorial intrusion and the attempt to align the reader to the world view propounded.

There then follows a second external, physical description, that of the other character present, who turns out to be Poirot. (Note that my use of ‘turns out to be’ is not casual.) Here negativity abounds: every single content word can be taken as expressing criticism, with a human entity being reduced to almost non-human status since only the tip of the person’s nose and the tips of his moustache are visible. The effect is also highly comic, resulting in a diminishing of the status and importance of the character, an outcome which is heightened by the contrast with the “resplendent” young officer, whose description precedes that of Poirot. Being introduced second is another pragmatic device (“be orderly”, again) which further decreases the character’s importance. Thus, we proceed from (apparently) more important to less important. Diminishing status by gentle mockery is a typical Christie play with regard to her

investigative heroes and heroines. While illocutionary and perlocutionary forces at sentence level are to make the character (Poirot, Miss Marple) present an unimportant self to the world, one important macro-level effect is to lull the criminal adversary into believing they are innocuous, thus lowering his psychological defences and making the commission of a revelatory mistake more probable.

Immediate confirmation is had of this hypothesis, since one of the main characters in the story, Mary Debenham, who is the third and final character introduced in this opening chapter, and one of the perpetrators of the murder, has the following thought on seeing Poirot for the first time in her life: “[67] A ridiculous-looking little man. [68] The sort of little man one could never take seriously.”

Indeed, only 4 pages later in the novel, there occur two episodes where perhaps the two most important characters in the ‘criminal group’ give away important ‘information’ which sets Poirot thinking – his first clues – that something is amiss:

As they [Colonel Arbuthnot and Mary Debenham] looked down towards the Cilian Gates, standing in the corridor side by side, a sigh came suddenly from the girl. Poirot was standing near them and heard her murmur:

“It’s so beautiful! I wish – I wish –”

“Yes?”

“I wish, I could enjoy it!”

Arbuthnot did not answer. The square line of his jaws seemed a little sterner and grimmer.

“I wish to heaven you were out of all this,” he said.

“Hush, please. Hush.”

“Oh, it’s all right.” He shot a slightly annoyed glance in Poirot’s direction. Then he went on: “But I don’t like the idea of your being a governess ...”.³⁵

Here we are on the Stamboul train. Poirot overhears the conversation of the two people. Mary Debenham’s defences are clearly down, thanks to her having misjudged Poirot. Instead Arbuthnot³⁶ is extremely wary. He thus warns Mary to use caution and changes the (dangerous) subject.

Later in the journey, the train stops at Koyna:

M. Poirot was content to watch the teeming activity of the station through a window pane. After about ten minutes, however, he decided that a breath of air would not perhaps be a bad thing, after all. He made careful preparations, wrapping himself in several coats and mufflers and encasing his neat boots in galoshes.

Thus attired he descended gingerly to the platform and began to pace its length. He walked out beyond the engine.

It was the voices which gave him the clue to the two indistinct figures standing in the shadow of a traffic van. Arbuthnot was speaking.

“Mary –”

The girl interrupted him.

“Not now. Not now. When it’s all over. When it’s behind us – then –”

Discreetly M. Poirot turned away. He wondered.³⁷

The final sentence, “He wondered”, conveys Poirot having judged what he has just heard as ‘abnormal’, a clue that something is not quite right. Again, the source of the abnormality is Mary Debenham’s reiterated lack of caution.

Before moving on to S5, a small number of linguistic comments will illustrate Christie’s technique.

³⁵ Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express*, 20.

³⁶ Arbuthnot is a colonel in the army, he has served many years in India (!), and he too underestimates Poirot. See Douthwaite, *The Social Function of the Detective Fiction of the Golden Age*.

³⁷ Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express*, 21.

The first interesting point about the second sentence in the extract just quoted, “After about ten minutes, however, he decided that a breath of air would not perhaps be a bad thing, after all”, is the final expression “after all”. This phrase is typical of speech. Furthermore, it is preceded by a comma, hence, on a syntactic level it constitutes a verbless clause. Thus, it has been rankshifted up, rendering the information it conveys more important. This grammatical status, together with the fact that the unit occupies end focus in the sentence and is graphologically highlighted by its brevity and by being preceded by a comma, thereby isolating it in the sentence, as well as by occupying end focus position, flags the expression as constituting a very important component. The preceding expression “he decided” introduces indirect speech, but thanks to the segmenting function performed by the comma, the form becomes hybrid, turning it virtually into Free Indirect Thought (FIT). In other words, we are penetrating Poirot’s consciousness.

This fact is important for two main reasons. First, the preceding sentence saw Poirot deciding to remain in the train because of the cold. In typical Christie fashion, this is not stated explicitly, but is inferable from co-text and context, (the emphasis on the cold weather). Furthermore, Christie is gently making fun of Poirot. This she does by flouting two Gricean maxims. First she provides too much information: “M. Poirot was content to watch” could have been stated more simply as ‘M. Poirot watched’. The inclusion of the emotional/mental state signals the flouting of the quality maxim, since in actual fact Poirot is far from “content” on being stuck in the train with nothing to do, a hypothesis which a further violation of quantity, “teeming with activity”, immediately confirms. The inclusion of the adjective “teeming” (quantity) together with its status as head of the phrase “teeming with activity” underscoring its importance make it seem as if one can almost feel Poirot wishing to go outside and participate! This then helps explain the violation of quantity and quantity in the second sentence: Poirot is not telling the whole truth – “a breath of air would not be a bad thing” is simply the excuse he dreams up to justify getting off the train thus contravening his decision to remain on board to avoid catching his death of cold. The behavior verges on the child-like. This brings us to the second main reason.

The next sentence describes the “careful preparations” and the almost ludicrous quantity of clothes he puts on. This is, of course, a reiteration of the description with which Poirot was presented to the reader at the beginning of the novel (the second half of S4). The effect is exactly the same – comic. There follows the conversation between Arbuthnot and Mary Debenham which Poirot overhears. Hence the reader recalls Mary’s initial judgement regarding Poirot’s innocuousness precisely when she makes another mistake which provides Poirot with his second clue since Christie has preceded the mistake with the mockery of Poirot. Christie’s writing is very tightly-knit. We now continue to S5.

[5] It was freezingly cold, and this job of seeing off a distinguished stranger was not one to be envied, but Lieutenant Dubosc performed his part manfully.

S5 would again appear to be pure description external description of the world and reporting, hence neutral omniscient narration. Again reality is decidedly more complex.

The first indicator is the degree adverb “freezingly” premodifying the adjectival head “cold”. The use of this evaluator again reveals the fact that point of view is being expressed; moreover, its metaphorical nature gives the impression that the focaliser is the character himself and not the narrator, for its use makes the reader ‘live’ the sensation of bitter cold the character is experiencing. This also confirms the Gricean relevance of the three concepts/details which form the core of S1 – “five o’clock in the morning” “winter” and “Syria”. The second indicator is proximal deictic “this”, which constitutes strong evidence that the focaliser is the French Lieutenant, since a narrator would have employed distal ‘that’ or, more simply, the definite article ‘the’. The third indicator is the use of the informal lexeme “job”, which expresses distaste, (hence point of view again), in *lieu* of a formal noun such as ‘task’ or ‘duty’, which would have linguistically mimicked the ‘rank’ of the task to be carried out and would have

consequently been more ‘neutral’, thereby suggesting the narrator at work. Instead, the deployment of such an expression which deviates from the high style of the S5 (as indicated by the expression “was not one to be envied”, with impersonal “one” reinforced by the impersonality of the passive voice), seems to insinuate Dubosc’s real feelings emerging despite his self-control. The fourth and fifth indicators are the coordinating conjunction “and” together with the syntactic structure of the first two clauses. Together these five linguistic devices suggest conversational style, hence the lieutenant’s thoughts, rather than an external omniscient narrator objectively reporting the mental state of the character. The use of the indefinite article “a” bolsters the argument, since the man whom the officer is “seeing off” is of no importance to him personally, it is only part of his “job”, a thesis confirmed by S22. The lieutenant is again indirectly revealing his attitude. The verb “seeing off” is also highly colloquial, again suggesting internal thought.

Finally, the last clause sees a change in style, to slightly greater formality indicating more external report in contrast to preceding internal narration, hence a shift to the narrator (e.g. “Lieutenant Dubosc” – honorific plus surname – “performed” – formal lexical verb). Indeed, the comment “manfully” would violate the Leechian modesty maxim (see note 40) were the observation attributable to the officer. We thus deduce the last clause expresses the narrator’s point of view. Confirmation of this interpretation derives from the fact that since the officer is not engaged in battle but simply accompanying a guest to the station on a bitterly cold morning, then “manfully” also performs the function of Christie gently mocking the lieutenant, again. So what Christie is mocking is ideology, for “manfully” suggests she is evoking the dominant, white, colonial male.

Before proceeding, two final observations are in order regarding S5. First, while the deployment of “stranger” indicates, at a literal level, that the lieutenant is unacquainted with Poirot and implies that he does not know what Poirot is doing there in Aleppo (a point which subsequent co-text will confirm – Us 7-20), the use of the noun also calls up the concept of Alterity, a point which the ‘low brow reader’ will be blithely unaware of. Support for this interpretation is provided by S10, with Dubosc’s use of “Belgian”, as will be explained shortly. The noun thus also performs a deictic function here, indicating the officer as focaliser. Second, “distinguished” expresses a positive value judgement which again confirms that the French officer conforms to the mores and behaviours of his reference group. His commanding officer classifies Poirot as “distinguished”, hence Dubosc follows suit. Stated differently, “distinguished” is not Dubosc’s own, independent judgement. The issue is not one of individuality but of social identity, hence reference group identity.

Returning to the discussion of “manfully”, S6 exploits the Gricean manner (sub maxim “be orderly”) to continue the gentle mockery of Dubosc and his ideology: “Graceful phrases fell from his lips in polished French”. These are not exactly the behaviours describing a brave soldier under enemy fire. The adjectives “graceful” and “polished” refer more to the salon than to the battle front. These concepts are reiterated in SS 69-71.

[69] Lieutenant Dubosc was saying his parting speech. [70] He had thought it out beforehand and had kept it till the last minute. [71] It was a very beautiful, polished speech.

The small talk that the two men have been socially obliged to engage in (SS 23-52) is yet another strong brush stroke in the picture of polite society that is being drawn and the ideology that such a society is based on. Note that one implication of S70 is that Dubosc has spent time and energy on preparing his speech (rather than cleaning his gun), confirming yet again his whole-hearted adherence to the ideology of his reference group. The fact that Dubosc had needed to ‘think it out before’ might also indicate limited intelligence, though other explanations are also possible, including limited practice in the art of the social graces. Such an explanation does not cancel the implicature, however.

S71 is lavish with degree expressions which reveal the intensity of Dubosc's conformity, a psycho-social trait which is depicted elsewhere in the text (e.g. S22). The fact that Dubosc had overheard part of the conversation between his General and Poirot (S15) but "as to what it had been all about, Lieutenant Dubosc was still in the dark" (S22) is simply another indirect way of expressing the concept that Dubosc is a soldier who follows orders, willingly, since, significantly, despite not having understood the conversation, the soldier expresses no curiosity in the matter! The importance of these individual features resides in the fact that they form part of the larger ideological canvas, which emerges forcefully from the part of the conversation Dubosc has overheard, and to which we now turn.

[5] It was freezingly cold, and this job of seeing off a distinguished stranger was not one to be envied, but Lieutenant Dubosc performed his part manfully. [6] Graceful phrases fell from his lips in polished French. [7] Not that he knew what it was all about. [8] There had been rumours, of course, as there were in such cases. [9] The General – his General's – temper had grown worse and worse. [10] And then there had come this Belgian stranger – all the way from England, it seemed. [11] There had been a week – a week of curious tensity. [12] And then certain things had happened. [13] A very distinguished officer had committed suicide, another had resigned – anxious faces had suddenly lost their anxiety, certain military precautions were relaxed. [14] And the general – Lieutenant Dubosc's own particular General – had suddenly looked ten years younger.

We have already noted that the first two clauses in S5 are focalised through the lieutenant, while the final clause is pure narration. The coordinating conjunction "but" serves not only on a semantic level to introduce a contrast in meaning, but also to signal a change in mode of speech and thought presentation.³⁸ S6 is also pure narration. Again the narrator's mocking voice can be distinguished in both "graceful" (the pure adherence to form, since the content performs only the phatic function of maintaining social relationships, with both men being bored and embarrassed) and, above all, in the lexical verb "fell", used metaphorically, which expresses a negative value judgment (bar for those who find delight in falling and breaking a bone in the process).

S7 moves into FIT, as the forward-shifting test demonstrates: 'Not that I know what it's all about'. Other linguistic signals in SS 7-14 confirm this interpretation: i) the plethora of dashes, breaking the smooth flow of the sentences, thereby indicating conversation and not organised, narratorial report. Two of the most glaring are the breaks in S10, giving the impression of developing thought (" - all the way from England"), an interpretation bolstered by the use of the intensifier "all the way", and in S11, where the interruption at the dash indicates a first part where the thought has not even been completed; ii) the deployment of expressions such as "of course" (S8) reinforces the breaking up of sentences into units depicting thought in formation rather than objective, neutral, highly-organised narratorial report; in addition, "of course" expresses a value judgment, someone's point of view; iii) deictic markers, such as "this" in "this Belgian stranger", performing a negative evaluative function parallel to its deployment in S5 ("this job"). It is no chance, I would suggest, that SS 5 and 10 both flaunt the lexeme "stranger". In S10 the premodifying adjective following the demonstrative adjective changes from "distinguished" (expressing the respect due to such a personage) to "Belgian", again underscoring the theme of Alterity, given the attitude French and Belgians had towards each other at the time; iv) the use of the coordinating conjunction "and", (S12, reiterated in S14), also suggests a conversational tone, especially so since it is semantically and grammatically redundant, violating the Gricean quantity maxim. Hence its function is to signal informal language; v) the intensive use of modalisers. In addition to those already quoted we might add "rumours" (S8), "curious" and "tensity" (S11), "very", "distinguished", "suicide", "resigned", "anxious", "suddenly", "precautions", "relaxed", all in S13, "suddenly" and "looked younger" in S14; v) the use of intensifiers such as "all the way" and "suddenly" (twice) again indicate point of view

³⁸ See Elena Semino and Mick Short, *Corpus Stylistics: Speech, Writing and Thought Presentation in a Corpus of English Writing* (London: Routledge, 2004).

through revealing the emotional state of the focaliser; vi) the deployment of “certain” in S12 and S13 exploits the manner maxim through deliberate vagueness, vagueness being a typical trait of conversation.

Identifying voice is, naturally, not simply a scholastic exercise. By placing us in Dubosc’s mind, Christie is i) guaranteeing the authenticity of what is expressed, (Semino and Short’s faithfulness principle)³⁹, ii) exposing the reader more vividly to the soldier’s thoughts, attitudes and emotions, c) consequently gaining alignment to her position.⁴⁰ It is no coincidence that one of the sincerity conditions developed by Austin to account for the success (or “felicity”) of a speech act is that the speaker must have the requisite thoughts, feelings and intentions. In simple terms, if in proposing marriage I fail to manifest the thoughts and feelings associated with that social act, (e.g. if I do not consciously and explicitly manifest the feeling that I am in love with the girl), then the lady I wish to convince will fail to believe I really love her and think that I am only after her money. Consequently my speech act will fail and my perlocutionary goal will not be achieved.

Let us turn to how this operates in SS8-14. One implication of S8 is that rumours, by definition, might not be true. The illocutionary force of S9 is to confirm that these particular rumours had some truth in them by offering supporting behavioural evidence: his General’s temper had grown steadily worse. One reason why tempers grow worse is that something is going badly wrong.

What might be noted about my explication is its vagueness. This reflects the vagueness of the text. Nothing is said EXPLICITLY. The expressions “rumours” and “such cases” are both unspecified. The evidence offered is indirect (worsening temper), hence the imprecision of my explanatory expression “one reason why”. These violations of the Gricean manner and quantity maxims may be attributed to the fact that Dubosc does not know – he, and consequently I, are hypothesising on the basis of the limited evidence available to us, as is all hypothesising.

This line of argument also helps confirm we are tracking the lieutenant’s thought processes and observing his emotions, from within. Hence the significance, in S9 of the interruption through the reiteration of the lexeme “General”, of the modification of “The General” into “*his* General”, with italics underscoring the heavy emotional commitment of the subordinate to his superior officer, and creating the implicature that the General is not usually bad-tempered, creating in its turn the further implicature that the situation is both highly unusual and extremely serious.

All the sentences up to and including S14 may be linguistically and pragmatically characterised in this way. Vagueness is exhibited in “this Belgian stranger”, “it seemed” (S10), “curious tensi” (S11), “certain things” (S12), “a very distinguished officer”, “another”, “anxious faces”, “their anxiety”, “certain military precautions”, “relaxed” (S13).

Furthermore, Christie constantly employs the same linguistic devices: flouting and exploiting Gricean maxims, degree and gradation, the manipulation of speech and thought presentation modes, modalisation, point of view, metaphor, manipulation of the pragmatic statuses on the syntagmatic axis (theme, end focus, contrastive focus).

Such intense linguistic patterning can, of course, only be symbolic. What is being depicted is the hushing up of a scandal, demonstrating embarrassment/guilt, allegiance to the *esprit de corps*, as the subsequent paragraph amply demonstrates. The key sentences here are:

[16] “You have saved us, *mon cher*,” said the General emotionally, his great white moustache trembling as he spoke. [17] “You have saved the honour of the French Army – you have averted much bloodshed!

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ See Mick Short et al., “Revisiting the Notion of Faithfulness in Discourse Report/(Re)presentation Using a Corpus Approach”, in *Language and Literature*, 11.4 (2002), 325-355.

First, Christie depicts the General, carefully selecting highly significant physical and behavioural traits: i) for a high-ranking officer, a “moustache” was almost as mandatory as the uniform; b) “great” emphasises the preceding point; iii) “white” symbolises ‘old age’, which in turn implies that respect must be shown to the wearer of the moustache, because of his age, one indicator of experience, hence of expertise and reliability; iv) “emotionally” is again a guarantee of the truthfulness of the concepts expressed by the speaker, v) “General” by ideological definition refers to a person who is worthy of respect by dint of his expertise (ideology not contemplating the possibility that someone who gets to the top of his profession is not necessarily an expert in that profession!), vi) “emotionally” exemplifies the sincerity condition illustrated above. In addition to confirming the General’s sincerity, one might also note the culture-bound nature of the behaviour, differing radically from the British stiff upper lip, which presumably constitutes another motive for its inclusion. The social portrait is again to the fore.

Second, the words spoken are equally significant in depicting a society and its ideology: i) “saved” is a powerfully redolent lexeme, since it implies concepts such as an extreme situation, strenuous, even superhuman effort, perhaps beyond the call of duty. This represents not only a strong echo of god-like Sherlock Holmes and the detective tradition in general, but also anticipates the second salvation in the novel, Poirot saving his friend the director of the railway company (and consequently the company) from scandal and the perpetrators of the crime from prison, ii) “*mon cher*” evokes emotion and a deep degree of intimacy and camaraderie, as develops when people experience extreme situations together, a concept which is reiterated by the referent “us”, where group identity and group values are called on as justification, which also anticipates ‘the second saving’ (to outrageously paraphrase Eliot); iii) “honour” is the lynchpin of a soldier’s behaviour, iv) “French Army” again calls to mind colonialism; it also exploits hyperbole (degree again) to emphasise just how important Poirot has been to the French cause (despite being Belgian), v) “averted much bloodshed” is an extremely positive value judgement, for although death is a staple diet for a general commanding troops in a colony, the idea that is implicit in the concept is that force and its negative consequences are to be avoided wherever possible – a great humanitarian ideal!

However, the most important mechanism revealing (and subterreaneously criticising) ideology is, to my mind, the exploitation of the Gricean manner maxim, again the sub-maxim “be orderly”. As cannot be reiterated too often, order is symbolic. This is far from being simply a question of ideational meaning, as in

[a] The man drank a bottle of whiskey and fell into the river.

[b] The man fell into the river and drank a bottle of whiskey.

In example a, the implications are that the man gets drunk, which causes him to lose control of his actions and being near the river he falls into the river. The inversion of the order in which the information is presented in example b implies a totally different chain of cause-effect events. The man falls into the river, the water is cold, this significantly lowers his body temperature, the man gets out of the river and drinks a bottle of whiskey in order to warm his body.

Order may affect not only ideational meaning, as in the preceding pair of examples, but may engage all the dimensions of the meanings of meaning. In the case of S17, order symbolises importance, which is, to reiterate the central concept I have been trying to drive home, *ideologically* based. On the general principle that first is more/most important, the General clearly implies the worldview that the honour (sic!) of the French Army is more important than avoiding death in armed conflict. The General, and Christie, could hardly be clearer than that. History, of course, is replete with examples where the General’s principle comes to light and mindless bloodshed is the result of ideology and human stupidity.

To mention only two, the Charge of the Light Brigade in the Crimean War and the Battle of Arnhem during World War II, to show this is not the exclusive terrain of the French.

[20] To which the stranger (by name M. Hercule Poirot) had made a fitting reply including the phrase, “But indeed do I not remember that once you saved my life?”

[21] And then the General had made another fitting reply to that disclaiming any merit for that past service, and with more mention of France, of Belgium, of glory, of honour and of such kindred things they had embraced each other heartily and the conversation had ended.

We now ‘officially’ discover that the second character is Poirot.

The text continues to be focalised through Dubosc. S20 is conversational in style: it is grammatically ill-formed, starting with a relative clause, demonstrating that it should have formed, syntactically speaking, part of the preceding sentence, the part in brackets represents an aside typical of speech or of an afterthought.

Not only is S20 a new sentence, but it constitutes the beginning of a new paragraph, clear indicators of the importance of the information it conveys. Foregrounding the sentence in this way brings this fact starkly to the reader’s attention. Foregrounding continues by placing important information (the character’s name), generally a graphological signal indicating information of lesser importance (irony and further mockery of the ignorant lieutenant, for the way the phrase is couched indicates he has no idea who Poirot is!) The sentence is foregrounded for at least three reasons: a) it reveals the character’s identity; b) it instantly shows Poirot’s adherence to the ideology of the society in question by his respecting linguistic norms, as demonstrated by the socially powerful adjective “fitting” premodifying the head noun “reply”; c) it exploits Gricean quantity and relevance by opting to disclose only one of the snippets Dubosc overheard: the General having saved Poirot’s life once renders Poirot honour-bound to defend the General if and when necessary. More importantly, indirectness is again at a premium, as is demonstrated by the syntactically incorrect interrogative form “do I not remember” when Poirot recalls full well such a vital fact! This form of politeness again signals belonging to a given social group, which entails, of course, adhering to the behavioural norms of that group. The social game continues quite subtly, for although the repetition of “fitting” blatantly constitutes (obligatory) reciprocity, changing mode of presentation from Poirot’s direct speech (DS) in S20 to narration (N) in S21 (“the General had made another fitting reply”) is a brilliant ploy. Poirot has distanced himself from his action by his use of the syntactic structure analysed above. The General in turn distancing himself from his own action is signalled by a change in mode of speech presentation, since reciprocity should, in theory, be signalled linguistically by parallelism in linguistic form. But what renders these two sentences so subtle is that the two linguistic devices just described actually duplicate the distancing effect which is implicitly achieved through the exploitation of Leech’s Politeness Principle.⁴¹ While Poirot exploits the maxim of praise, the General exploits the diametrically opposite maxim of modesty. Distancing is thus a mechanism employed to play down their own role in the affairs referred to, again manifesting adherence to sociolinguistic behavioural norms.⁴²

The continuation of the General’s turn in S21 returns us to the core of ideology: “and with more mention of France, of Belgium, of glory, of honour and of such kindred things they had embraced each other heartily and the conversation had ended”. The change in syntactic construction beginning with the coordinating conjunction “and” again indicates conversational style, hence Dubosc as focaliser. Again

⁴¹ See Geoffrey N. Leech, *Principles of Pragmatics* (Burnt Mill, Harlow: Longman Group Limited, 1983).

⁴² Clearly, the selection of the linguistic expression is a choice attributable to the characters themselves, while the choice of mode of speech and thought presentation is made by the author/narrator. Hence, the duplicative effect is, in actual fact, a combined effort of character and narrator. I bring this point to the reader’s attention to underscore the fact that the text is even more complex than the explanations I can provide in the space available.

quantity and manner are exploited. One implication of the “mention of France” is that Poirot is praising French society and through such praise is concurrently and indirectly praising the General himself, a member of that society, and “Belgium” implies the General doing likewise to laud Poirot. Next come “glory” and “honour”, reiterating the respect of ideology identified in S17. It might be noted that the reiteration of “glory” and “honour” stands in stark contrast with the ‘concern’ expressed in S17, “you have averted much bloodshed”. Given the amount of space devoted to such matters clearly underlines where the General’s real values are.

Next comes a behavioural act expressing strong emotions “embraced”, intensified by the adverb “heartily”, duplicating the realisation of the Austinian sincerity which guarantees the veracity of the communicative act expressed through the emotion. Significantly, attention is directed explicitly to the fact that such an emotional show of allegiance to social norms brings the conversation to a close, though the pragmatic link is partially hidden by the use of the coordinating conjunction “and”: “and the conversation had ended”. Indeed, such a closure is extremely strange (foregrounding) for a) it is cold and distant b) it goes against standard expectations as to closures. More usual would have been, ‘and Poirot departed’. Instead Christie wishes to focus attention on the nature of the conversation itself, its phatic and ideological nature. However, she again makes gentle fun by the play on formal “kindred” contrasting with informal and vague “such” and “things”. The clash of styles demeans the preceding ideological discourse, while on the other hand the noun “kindred” appears to appeal to the noun ‘kind’, as in ‘mankind’ (species, group) to invoke yet again solidarity, while for Christie it constitutes gentle sarcasm.

The following paragraph seems a particularly successful episode of *jouissance*,⁴³ a phenomenon which Christie delights in engaging in:

[22] As to what it had been all about, Lieutenant Dubosc was still in the dark, but to him had been delegated the duty of seeing off M. Poirot by the Taurus Express, and he was carrying out with all the zeal and ardour befitting a young officer with a promising career ahead of him.

Having already made a number of observations on this paragraph, what I wish to stress here is Christie’s playfulness. Note first the heavy alliteration drawing attention to the language itself. Take the letter “d”: “had”, “Dubosc”, “dark”, “delegated”, “duty”, “ardour”, “ahead”. The first part of S22 (up to the coordinating conjunction “but”) is informal and focalised through Dubosc. Conceptually, his openly admitting his ignorance, and the play on “Dubosc” and metaphorical “[in the] dark” suggests disarming ingenuousness. The second part is far more formal (lexical choice sufficing to demonstrate this, e.g. “delegated”, “ardour”, “befitting”), to the extent of suggesting pompousness, an attitude attributable to the narrator. The tone of the paragraph thus paves the way for the following section, the fairly lengthy conversation that goes from S22 to S52 and which seems to come directly from the theatre of the absurd. It would not have gone too far amiss in a play by Ionesco.

[23] “Today is Sunday,” said Lieutenant Dubosc.

[24] “Tomorrow, Monday evening, you will be in Stamboul.”

With just some slight modification, which I humbly offer without any claim to being anywhere near Ionesco or Beckett’s heights, SS23-24 would fit into, say, *Waiting for Godot*: “Today is Sunday. Tomorrow is Monday. Monday evening perhaps Godot will come”.

⁴³ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”, in *Image Music Text*, trans. and ed. by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill, 1977).

What, of course, is significant is that Christie draws attention to the social situation and to the linguistic mechanisms at work in that context:

[25] It was not the first time he had made this observation.

[26] Conversations on the platform, before the departure of a train, are apt to be somewhat repetitive in character.

This constitutes firm evidence that i) Christie is well aware of her craft and of her objectives, ii) her selections are motivated, as suggested earlier, iii) she constantly intervenes.

One of the functions realised by the ‘absurd’ section is, naturally, comicity and the continuation of the gentle mockery Christie has engaged in from the outset. Such comicity would seem to deflect from the real pathway – the detective novel, and may thus be taken as a ploy akin to that of making Poirot appear ridiculous and ineffectual. If the reader did not know he was reading a Poirot novel, he would have little inkling of where this is all leading.

We now move forward to the central ideological debate that takes place with the introduction of Mary Debenham into the action.

[53] Above their heads the blind of one of the sleeping-car compartments was pushed aside and a young woman looked out.

[54] Mary Debenham had had little sleep since she left Baghdad on the preceding Thursday. [55] Neither in the train to Kirkuk, nor in the rest house at Mosul, nor last night on the train had she slept properly. [56] Now, weary of laying wakeful in the hot stuffiness of her overheated compartment, she got up and peered out.

[57] This must be Aleppo. [58] Nothing to see, of course. [59] Just a long, poor-lighted platform with loud furious altercations in Arabic going on somewhere. [60] She tried to force the window down lower, but it would not go.

In S53 cohesion is put to effective use through fronting the adverbial phrase “[A]bove their heads”, therefore foregrounding the phrase. This enables attention to be moved smoothly from the two men on the platform to the new character who is being introduced and who is placed in the final clause in the sentence in order to create a new centre of attention.

The parallelism with the opening paragraph should be noted: a) both S2 and S53 exhibit a marked theme, though this is achieved through inversion in S2 and through left dislocation in S53, b) the lack of a name, c) the ‘naturalness’ of the situation, event and details, creating a convincing sense of realism. One crucial component is that the presentation of the information follows time and logical sequence: first a noise is heard “above their [the men’s] heads”, then the blind is seen being pushed aside, and finally the woman appears, d) sequencing and the non-identification of the person again function to arouse curiosity.

This set of factors allows, naturalises, and consequently hides, the abruptness of the introduction of the name – the thematic constituent of S54. More ‘normal’ would have been the inclusion of an intermediate, transitional sentence functioning as presentation of the new character, such as ‘It was Mary Debenham, a lady who had been working as a teacher in Syria. She had had little sleep ...’.

Instead, the illocutionary force of S53 confirms the smoothness of the transition: explanation plus justification. A woman has just opened the blind of her compartment at five o’clock on a bitterly cold winter morning at a train station in Syria. One naturally asks why. Again, realism is perfect, as it is throughout the chapter. The sub-sentential components are also perfect. For instance, the inclusion of time “on the preceding Thursday” coupled with “little sleep” implies that despite being very tired through lack of sleep, Mary Debenham had woken up at five in the morning. This, of course, is

somewhat strange, the reader will think. S55 is yet another sentence which exploits intensification, for the (presumably) last three places Mary has slept are mentioned to reinforce the concept that she “had had little sleep”, established in the preceding sentence. Stranger and stranger. Thus, S56 provides the explanation that will satisfy the reader’s textually-provoked curiosity: the compartment is so overheated that it prevents Mary from sleeping and she becomes frustrated (“weary of laying wakeful”). Furthermore, the places mentioned show that she has travelled over 800 miles in the last few days in trains of a hundred years ago which have previously been criticised by the narrator, factors which will have added to her tiredness (relevance).

Note the persistent use of intensification/repetition, flouting yet again the quantity maxim: “hot”, “stiffness”, “overheated”. One function realised by such floutings is again that of making the reader live through what Mary is experiencing. It also indicates thoughts and feelings rather than simply physical conditions. It also makes for realism. Finally, it prepares the ground for the move into Free Direct Thought (FDT) in S57.

Multifunctionality and the importance of seemingly minor details does not finish here. Note the imprecision (hence the violating of the manner maxim) of the expression “the preceding Thursday”. It *creates* the sensation of a lengthy period of time, which in turn constitutes one of the factors accounting for Mary Debenham’s tiredness. However, since the precise time is unknown, then it could, in theory have been even only two or three days previously. In this case, quantity is exploited by furnishing a lot of vague information: leaving Baghdad, the train to Kirkuk, a night in Mosul, some time spent on the Taurus Express. The imprecision prevents the acquisition of exact knowledge while the quantity of information provided creates the impression of a long period having passed.

Given that a) the subject of the last clause in S56 (“she”) refers to Mary Debenham, b) the syntactic form of S57 (“This must be Aleppo”) indicates that STP mode is FDT (proximal “this”, the use of the present tense), c) given the exploitation of the manner maxim (sub-maxim be orderly), then with this new paragraph beginning at S57 we have moved effortlessly into the character’s mind and are observing her thoughts. The ungrammatical form of S58 confirms conversational tone and FDT mode. The illocutionary force may be hypothesised as expressing disappointment – there being nothing to ‘distract’ her, she will continue to be bored and frustrated.

S59 is also ungrammatical, and semantically constitutes an expansion of the preceding thought, confirming we are tracking Mary Debenham’s mind. As with much of the chapter, this sentence appears at first reading to be void of any deeper significance. Here, too, this is far from being the case. “Just” in informationally-strong sentence-initial position expresses attitude – the disappointment and frustration. The adjective “long” uses a physical quality, (great quantity of space), to intensify the sense of boredom and frustration – you look around but all you see everywhere you look is that empty platform. The adjective “poor-lighted” suggest the performing of two functions: i) had there been anything to see on the long platform, the poor lighting would not have helped the process of perception ii) social criticism – these foreigners spend little money on public utilities. Stated differently, all the linguistic items analysed in this paragraph are negative evaluators.

The reader might well think I am stretching the text too far, for what I am suggesting is that a racist attitude is being projected and that I have based this interpretation on two ‘minor’ pieces of evidence (“just”, “poor-lighted”) which are, moreover, far from being conclusive. The fact of the matter is that any interpretation is founded on co-text, context and knowledge of the world. Generally, a feature of a linguistic device do not occur in isolation, as we shall immediately see.

Thus, the next indicator is the attitude expressed in the final prepositional phrase: “with loud furious altercations in Arabic going on somewhere”. This is the first direct reference to Arabic culture, and the feature selected for communication is that of “loud furious altercations”, three negative value judgements. The reader might again object: ‘But if that was what was happening, then Mary Debenham

is not manifesting a racist attitude toward the Other, but merely reporting what is objectively true – there were Arabs arguing loudly.’

Two major arguments can be mustered against this objection.

First, we have only Mary’s word (for we are still in FDT) that the people were indeed arguing, for it is an established fact that volume varies from one culture to another.⁴⁴ What in an English conversation might well be an indicator of a row might not be such in a different culture where a higher volume is the norm for ‘ordinary’ conversation.

Second, perception is selective.⁴⁵ When I look out of the window and see and hear what is out there, I cannot describe/report the plethora of details perceptible, for it would be time-consuming as well as pointless, that is to say, it would violate the quantity principle (efficiency) and it would not be goal-directed, i.e. it would not be communicative. This may be demonstrated in this specific case by Mary not listing the number of lamps on the platform, the colour of the lamps, how tall the lamps are, the number of benches, the colour of the benches, the material of which they are made, and so on and so forth. Thus people select to communicate only those things which are of interest to them, which affect them, and/or which are relevant to their goals. In the final analysis, behaviour is socially determined, hence it is culturally determined. If I am born in a certain country, then the statistical probability is that the religion I (think I) opt for will be that which is socially dominant. This, of course, is the process of socialisation, without which any society is doomed to an extremely swift end. Of all the things that Mary could theoretically have mentioned she chooses to convey those which for her are significant. Furthermore, she communicates only two pieces of information: poor lighting and loud furious altercations, both negative evaluators. Thirdly, she adds “in Arabic”, providing a highly specific identity marker. Otherness could have been omitted simply by suppressing that prepositional phrase. Fourthly, she adds “somewhere”, from which it may be inferred that the people referred to are not in her direct line of vision. But she fails to state that Poirot and Dubosc are talking just a few metres away from her, despite their being highly visible and just as easily audible as the distant Arabs. The strangeness of this fact is compounded by her current situation: she is bored, hence the two men conversing would have aroused her interest. In conclusion, in revealing what she perceives she reveals her ideology., just as we all do.

S60 adds weight to this interpretation. While SS57-59 are presented in FDT mode, S60 moves into N mode. However, signals such as the syntactic construction of “it would not go” (the reporting of ‘It won’t go’, which is what the character would think, whereas a narrator is more likely to employ a construction such as ‘it didn’t open’ or ‘she couldn’t open it’) shows that the sentence is focalised through Mary Debenham.

On the pragmatic level, the illocutionary forces realised by the first clause in the sentence (“She tried to force the window down lower”) are effect and solution to a problem. She is hot, she cannot turn the heating down, so she seeks a solution: opening the window. Note the use of the lexical verb “force down” in lieu of standard ‘open’. The implication, of course, is that the train is badly manufactured and maintenance work is not done, an implication which was first advanced by the narrator himself in S2 and analysed earlier, triggered by the sarcastic expression “grandly designated”. The illocutionary force of the second part of the clause “but it would not go”, expresses failure of the solution adopted, implying once again criticism of the quality of the rolling stock. Note finally that the lexical verb “tried” presupposes failure. So what has failed is not simply attributable to a couple of physical defects, (overheating and a window that will not open), but to an entire cultural way of life.

Now I do not wish to argue that Mary Debenham is a racist. I do, however, contend that perception is culturally determined, hence what she ‘sees’ and what she ‘hears’ or selects to see and hear, are

⁴⁴ See John Douthwaite, *Teaching English as a Foreign Language* (Torino: SEI, 1990).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

components which are ‘different’ because they are ‘filtered’ through the lens of her Western identity. In other words, what she perceives is relevant because it establishes her group identity, which is, in its turn, important in the novel because the action is based on issues of morality and justice. And it is a continuation of the indirect ‘discussion’ of ideology that was begun in the very title of the chapter, not to mention the title of the novel, since “Murder” and “Orient Express” are value-loaded terms.⁴⁶

Strangeness continues with the next paragraph.

[61] The wagon Lit conductor had come up to the two men.

[62] The train was about to depart, he said.

[63] Monsieur had better mount.

[64] The little man removed his hat.

[65] What an egg-shaped head he had.

[66] In spite of her preoccupations Mary Debenham smiled.

[67] A ridiculous-looking little man.

[68] The sort of little man one could never take seriously.

We start by identifying the modes of speech and thought presentation in this paragraph, since this is essential to gauging effect. S61 appears to have the form of narration. However, a) the previous paragraph was presented in FDT and N focalised through the character, no linguistic signal of a transition to a different mode of presentation is offered (the default situation in communication being that linguistic construction and/or linguistic device changes when something significant in the text changes) (Gricean manner maxim, sub-maxim ‘be orderly’), b) the lexical verb employed is “come” and not ‘go’, suggesting movement towards the deictic centre, and Mary is near the two men, c) as co-text will immediately bear out, we immediately return into Mary’s consciousness. In conclusion, this is N mode focalised through Mary Debenham.

S62 would appear to constitute reported or indirect speech (IS), were it not for the omission of the conjunction “that”, the presence of the comma, and the inclusion of “he said” following that comma. Hence S62 is a hybrid form between IS and Free Indirect Speech (FIS). A more radical interpretation might be entertained: since the reporting clause is an ‘addition’, almost an afterthought, S62 may be hypothesised as being FIS, Mary is repeating to herself (though for the reader’s benefit), the conductor’s words. Again, we appear to be in Mary’s mind. This is important since what requires an explanation when one encounters an expression of the type ‘he/she said’ is the identity of the reporting entity.

S63 is clearly Free Direct Speech (FDS), spoken by the wagon Lit conductor. The problem is, of course, that no signal has been offered to indicate that we have moved into the conductor’s consciousness. Nor does there appear to be a plausible reason as to why it should be important to penetrate his mind, especially since the speech act he is performing is simply that of inviting the passenger to board the train. Hence the hypothesis the source of consciousness is still Mary.

The syntactic form of S64 appears to suggest pure N. However, N mode and S mode are renowned for sharing the feature of possessing the same syntactic form.⁴⁷ A sentence such as ‘He was ill’ could constitute N mode of FIT mode. The locutionary force of S64 is that of describing a past action. (A fuller analysis will be offered below for reasons of relevance). The question arises as to who could be communicating such a fact. First, the only possible focalisers are the narrator, the soldier and Mary.

⁴⁶ In “A Stylistic View of Modality” I demonstrate how even linguistic items defined by the code as value-free, or neutral, can, depending on the use they are put to in a text, become value-loaded terms. Thus, while “murder” is a negative modaliser by linguistic definition, the name of a train is, in theory, value-free. However, we saw earlier that in this Christie novel, the names of trains is anything but neutral, for they immediately evoke a context and its accompanying social structure and ideology.

⁴⁷ See Elena Semino and Mick Short, *Corpus Stylistics*, 11.

Second, again no linguistic signal has been provided to signal a change in consciousness. This would suggest Mary as the source of the signal.

S65 seals the preceding argument. It is clearly colloquial and it blatantly expresses a value judgement. It constitutes FDT. The conductor has played no active role so far, so such a judgment would be irrelevant since it would not be goal-directed. It is out of character for the lieutenant. The colloquial style is foreign to the narrative mode so far. The narrator is also excluded by the fact that S65 is in FDT.

S66 is steadfastly in N mode. The narrator is reporting Mary's mental states ("preoccupations", "smiled"). By so doing, the narrator confirms topic unity and continuity.⁴⁸ Stated differently, he is confirming that we have been seeing and hearing what Mary has been seeing and hearing and have been following her thoughts and emotions.

SS67-68 are Mary's FDT. They express her value judgements, the first personal, the second almost aphoristic. In other words, in one way or another, in this paragraph we never leave Mary Debenham's head.

This latter fact of the entire paragraph being either Mary thinking or her thoughts and feelings being reported is important for at least two vital reasons.

First, we now discover that she DID see the Poirot and the lieutenant, whereas the previous impression obtained from the preceding paragraph had been that she had not. Now this discovery adds strong evidence to the thesis advanced above that what she thought about – the information she conveyed in SS58-60 – enables the reader to infer her ideology.

The second important reason is that, as stated above, like many other characters who meet Poirot in Christie's novels, she erringly comes to the immediate conclusion he is innocuous.

What should be noted is that the thesis is reinforced rhetorically through climax. Significantly, the paragraph presents two climactic points. The second, at paragraph end, (SS67-68), has already been commented on. The first occurs at S63 where the conductor's words are presented verbatim. This is so, because the conductor is actually imparting an order, though ever so politely, naturally. So the fall in climax in the following sentence, S64, sees Poirot obeying the order. 'Ah!', the reader will say, 'but the text says that Poirot took off his hat, not that he got on the train'. Christie never fails to be indirect. Removing his hat is the initial step in the codified closure sequence which standardly brings conversations to an end, a non-verbal signal respectfully announcing the closing ceremony, a ritual which goes from S69 to S78. The fact that Poirot embarks on this ritual concurrently provides the textual opportunity for Miss Debenham to make her gross misevaluation. The proverbial two birds with one stone.

Aspects of this ritual have been commented on earlier, so I will make two final points.

First, as has been noted above, Poirot falls into the detective tradition. One aspect of this tradition, and one which is especially relevant to the private or unofficial detective, is his god-like stature. He is the best, and no one can out-do him – in any sector – including linguistic repartee.⁴⁹ Thus when Dubosc finishes his "beautiful, polished speech" (S71), "[n]ot to be outdone, M. Poirot replied in kind" (S72).

Second, in communication, far less is said than is meant. The reader must fill out the signal with meaning for himself. Hence, the importance of aspects such as knowledge of the world and empathy – in the first instance, how people tick. One can readily imagine a slightly modernised Dubosc thinking (hence intending), by his utterance "Brrrrr", something like: 'Hells bells – I've had to get up at four o'clock in the morning to accompany this imbecile-looking dwarf and freeze to death, just to please my General. Still, it was probably worth it, seeing how the old man has regained his old jovial spirit since the dwarf arrived.'

⁴⁸ See Brown and Yule, *Discourse Analysis*, Chapter 3 *passim*.

⁴⁹ See John Douthwaite, *Detective Stories* (Genova: Cideb, 1995), XLI-XLII.

4. The Wider Canvass: Text, *Oeuvre*, Tradition and Aesthetics

The core thesis that has been illustrated in this paper is that complexity is the hallmark of all communication, even of those communicative events that appear to be simplicity itself. Stated differently, there is no such thing as simplicity in communication.

If complexity and multifacetedness are the norm, then they cannot necessarily be taken *per se* as indicators of aesthetic value. To begin to tackle this question we now focus more on the level of text (the entire text) and *oeuvre* and its relation to genre, to the social structure and culture that produce the work, and to the tradition that that particular work and genre are embedded in.

The case of Christie is particularly significant in relation to complexity and aesthetics for two main reasons. First, because literature is generally deemed as having ‘more to say’ than ‘ordinary conversation’, and second, because until recently Christie was traditionally held to be a producer of entertainment rather than Literature with a capital L. Namely Christie’s texts were judged to be devoid of complex ‘material’ requiring a) intellectual effort for its comprehension and b) the pondering over moral issues.⁵⁰ Here we enter the realm of aesthetics and the value of ‘literature’.

Until recently, if any social message was detected in Christie’s crime novels, it was taken as being patently and adamantly conservative: the protection of the *status quo*, the standard ideological position of classic crime fiction. However, in the case of Christie’s production, critics held that her underlying objective could be pinpointed more precisely: the defense of middle class interests in the face of economic crisis and diminishing buying and saving power (akin to what has been happening in Europe and elsewhere in the last decade and more).

Knight provides one ‘classic’ statement of this position in a work that is considered to be central to criticism of the crime fiction genre:

Her [Christie’s] stories realized the attitudes and resolved the anxieties of many people, especially women, whom earlier crime stories did not interest or satisfy. Three features of her own formation were basic. As a woman she had no interest in the active male narcissism common to much male crime fiction; being of upper-middle-class she firmly believed and recreated the values of the English property-owning bourgeoisie; having almost no formal education she offered nothing more difficult than sharp observation and orderly thought as the systems by which crime was detected and disorder contained.⁵¹

While one may concur with Knight’s first contention that, as a woman, Christie was not interested in the ‘*macho*’ trend(s) in crime fiction, (e.g. ‘hard-boiled’ crime writing), I hope I have demonstrated that Christie’s writing is far more complex than the simple offering of “sharp observation and orderly thought”. The extreme degree of indirectness in even Christie’s simplest sentences constrains the reader to seek the ‘orderliness’ that lies *below* the surface, and the ‘sharp observation’ of itself requires a certain degree of mental processing to comprehend its significance. The analysis carried out and the results obtained therefrom call for a reappraisal of Knight’s contention that Christie merely “recreated the values of the English property-owning bourgeoisie ... she firmly believed [in]”.

I will limit the discussion to three major aspects.

Firstly, Christie the author/narrator constantly ‘intervenes’ with gentle mockery or burlesque even, directed at *all* her characters, hero included. This does not exactly argue for whole-hearted identification with the values of her own ‘class’, for such representatives of that class as appear in her novels do not avoid debunking. Nor are they always paragons of virtue or outstanding intellectuals. Stolid, middle-

⁵⁰ Readers will hopefully pardon this highly succinct appraisal of aesthetics and of the fact that it sounds like “The Great Tradition”, an unintentional side-effect. Space and objectives prevent in depth treatment.

⁵¹ Knight, *Crime Fiction*, 107.

class Mrs. Hubbard represents a cogent example of the kind of social criticism Christie engages in no matter who the butt of her irony or sarcasm is. Here is another gem from the lady:

Mrs Hubbard was off again.

“There isn’t anybody knows a thing on this train. And nobody’s trying to do anything. Just a pack of useless foreigners. Why, if this were at home, there’d be someone at least *trying* to do something”.⁵²

The most significant point here is that the authorial intervention which precedes Mrs Hubbard’s turn is critical: “was off” and “again” are stark negative evaluators. The informal lexical verb is a negative modaliser while ‘again’ presupposes reiteration of the ‘crime’ and consequently implicit criticism and possibly emotions such as frustration, indignation.

The second highly significant point is that what might first appear to be out-and-out racism (as conveyed by expressions such as “just a pack of useless foreigners”) is toned down by Mrs Hubbard softening her position through expressing the concept “trying”. Since the lexical verb presupposes⁵³ that success is not guaranteed or, in this case, that failure is to be expected, Mrs Hubbard is portrayed as being aware of the fact that her ‘race’ is not god-like, hence perfect, but human, hence fallible. Further softening occurs through depicting her as highly frustrated and incapable of controlling her nerves. We thus witness her crying.

What Christie paints, therefore, is not a two-toned portrait, but one where at least some of the colours of the palette are present. Mrs Hubbard is not quite a totally flat character. This stricture applies to all Christie’s major characters, none excepted.

The third interesting point about Mrs Hubbard is that at the end, we discover she is actually Linda Arden, Mrs Arden’s mother and an actress. Hence Mrs Hubbard is a total fiction. This poses the moot question as to whether the stereotypes she represents are ‘true’ or not. The answer to this question is not crucial, inasmuch as one can argue, for instance, that she copied an extant stereotype. However, the minimal response raised by this issue is that Christie has created ambiguity.

The fourth point strengthens the third. Throughout the novel Christie constantly draws attention to the fictitious nature of her work (e.g. “the threatening letters were in the nature of a blind. They might have been lifted bodily out of an indifferently written American crime novel”, p. 282), again calling into question what her ‘real’ objectives are in producing this work.

The second major line of argument is, on the contrary, concerned with the real, inasmuch as Christie deals with the problems of her time. True, many of her novels ARE concerned with the waning of social and economic importance of the English middle class, but this is by no means her sole concern. For instance, a ‘late’ novel published in 1970, six years before her death, entitled *Passenger to Frankfurt*, sees Christie engaging with the resurgence of neo-Nazi groups all over the world and an attempt by the authorities to control and contain such violent, destructive right-wing movements. *A propos* of such political groups, it should not be forgotten that the rise of extreme right-wing movements is linked to the impoverishment of the middle class, which consequently supports such movements in an attempt to regain the socio-economic position it has lost, showing Christie’s interests are wide-ranging and not limited to the country monied classes.

Given such premises, the last two decades has witnessed a reappraisal of Christie’s work, arguing that it more complex and problematic than previous critics held, as well as more wide-ranging in its thematic and moral concerns.

⁵² Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express*, 57.

⁵³ See Stephen C. Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1983).

Following in the critical path drawn by Plain⁵⁴ and Rowland⁵⁵ on culture and gender in the work of Christie, Makinen⁵⁶ devotes a book to Christie's position on the gender question. She argues that Christie denied the extant view that women were different from men, (as represented by the low brow newspaper *Daily Mirror*, which she examines), claiming that female villains were

as equally bad as the male villains ... Often the women [...] are revealed as having a moral weakness in their character ... From the 1930s to the 1970s, Christie's villains unproblematically assume either gender, and the female villains enact exactly the same motives as the males, delineated ... as money, fear, revenge and love and fuelled by a moral immaturity and egoism. It is interesting to note how ... the *Daily Mirror*'s attempts to construct female murderers as emotional or monsters, the crimes tied to domestic love and jealousy, [while] Christie gives her women more public-focussed motives of greed and vanity, and takes pains to normalize them as ordinary people.⁵⁷

Essentially, Christie sees women 'as they are', so to speak, and not as traditional male stereotyping would have us see them – angels of the house, turned into devils in the case of those females engaged in criminal activity. This is tantamount to arguing that women are the product of their own environment just as much as men and that Christie consequently analyses that environment in her novels. Hence they are moved by "the same motives as the males" and commit the same crimes.

Makinen's conclusion that "Christie's texts repudiate the othering of English femininity, representing it as a central, unalienated 'part of us'" leads her to ask a further question: "what occurs to the portrayal of gender when the further formulation of the 'alien' or 'other', that of race and nationality, compounds the depiction?" While accepting the traditional view that Christie is conservative, Makinen's analysis of a number of the novels which take place on foreign terrain using the tools of literary criticism lead her to conclude that Christie is far from being a producer of monologic texts. On the contrary, her novels are replete with contradictions:

Christie's detective novels have a complex relationship to the practice of 'othering' foreign, Mediterranean cultures of the West and the East. She does create binary divides between national cultures, reinforce national stereotypes, and she uses the foreign countries as sites of to re-define Englishness, at times specifically English femininity. But the texts are more dialogic and open than one might traditionally expect. In the western Mediterranean countries the authorial point of view is European, rather than English, while in the eastern Mediterranean countries divergent cultural mores are allowed an equally valid authority. English prejudices against the Jew and the Greek are unpacked to backfire against the Anglo-Saxon depictions ... [and] her representation of other countries and gender are complex, ambivalent and complicated.⁵⁸

My analysis employing the tools of stylistics and pragmatics leads me not simply to concur with some of the points made above by Makinen, such as "complex, ambivalent and complicated", but perhaps to go even further. Christie's lampooning of *all* her characters suggests not only a more critical attitude towards the world in general, but a deliberately critical attitude which sits ill with a squarely conservative stance, which, to boot, reflects the worldview of one particular social class.

⁵⁴ See Gill Plain, *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Press, 2001).

⁵⁵ See Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Writing* (London: Palgrave, 2001).

⁵⁶ See Merja Makinen, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 181.

The complexity of her writing technique, which, following King Lear's advice, I have attempted to anatomise, would indeed suggest motivation, in the Russian Formalist sense, to return to a much earlier point, thus bearing out the contention of conscious critique.

One macro argument supporting my view is Christie's basic ideological tenet that people are fundamentally evil, a point constantly reiterated throughout the majority of her novels.⁵⁹ If this hypothesis is any way near correct, then it eliminates 'difference', whatever factor that difference may be attributed to in the concrete situations she deals with.

"Wickedness", the term Christie uses frequently together with "evil" to describe the human condition, is not distributed amongst the world's population along lines of class, race, nationality, gender and so forth, but is hard-wired, instinctual, or whatever variant of the conservative theory of human nature one wishes to champion.

The third major argument concerns the market, hence the conditions of production. Christie did write to be read. If Ngugi wa Thiong'o is content initially with lower sales (and consequently is happy with writing in Gikuyu before having his works translated into English), Christie was not. Ngugi is declaredly ideologically committed and the postcolonial 'ocean' which sees this sector as almost 'independent', has paved the way for Ngugi, making his choice a given point in his career to write first in his native tongue one that did not lose the market position he had conquered. Hence, one final factor to be considered is that to remain at the top of the bestsellers list one must in some way attract the buyer. One essential ingredient in achieving this goal is not to alienate the target reader's worldview. Being critical and conservative at the same time in the way Christie seems to be in her novels does seem to be a shade contradictory, ambivalent, *mon vieux* as Poirot would put it? The counter-hypothesis is that ambivalence is a tool employed to make her works *appear* conservative while actually trying to undermine the social and ideological structures she unveils in order to avoid turning her readers against her.

The point returns us to the aspects Christie does concentrate on. While above I sustained that more extensive analysis is required, the starting point of such analysis what she selects to reveal about her characters appears to relate directly to her ideological stance, to their position in society, to the constraining norms of the genre, of its tradition, and of context. We thus move from sentential and sub-sentential levels to supra-sentential, discursal level

... In any case, Poirot gave him [Dr Constantine] no time for questions. Opening the door into the corridor, he called for the conductor.
The man arrived at a run.⁶⁰

Here domination, a typical trait of the detective hero, is to the fore. First Poirot allows the doctor who examined the corpse no opportunity to set him questions. This renders the doctor a powerless person, a non-entity, totally at Poirot's beck and call. Then Poirot issues a peremptory order to the conductor, confirming he is in command. His power is demonstrated here by a behavioural act, "the man arriv[ing] at a run". Speed is not necessary here for functional reasons, (e.g. saving someone who is dying), but an indicator that the M. Bouc, the company director, has given strict orders for total obedience to Poirot and that the conductor is very dutifully toeing the line.

Power is further emphasized by two linguistic markers: i) the form of reference "the man" demotes the conductor by failing to call him by his name, since Poirot knows him full well; ii) the deployment of the preposition "for" in the lexical verb "called for" in *lieu* of 'called' conveys the idea that Poirot uttered the order in such a way as to be indirect, distancing himself from the conductor, for instance by

⁵⁹ For a discussion of this thesis see Douthwaite, *Agatha Christie*, section 5.2.4 and *passim*.

⁶⁰ Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express*, 87.

not popping his head out of the door and looking at the man in the eye but simply shouting out loud ‘Conductor’. Both these linguistic signals remove the person’s individual identity reducing him to the status of his working role.

Clearly, these are indicators of the context – of the power structure and of Poirot executing his duties in that power structure in total and solitary command. Despite having no real official, legal status. Such behaviour also constitutes part of the identity of the mainstream detective as all-powerful. It is thus genre-evoking and genre-confirming.

Complexity is again to the fore: indirectness, genre, tradition, context are all at work concurrently to create multiple meanings. Despite this important fact, all the implications identified are not difficult to grasp consciously, nor do they lead to the kind of comprehension and questioning of life that one expects from great literature. They do not appear to be of any signal importance beyond the telling of the detective story. For instance, no criticism is implied of the power structure.

Another example will seal the point. Here Poirot is interrogating Colonel Arbuthnot, a true (viz. stereotypical) Brit, as well as one of the major players in the planning and execution of the ‘murder’, a point I will take up three paragraphs below. The Colonel has already expressed his extreme distaste for America and Americans. Poirot is interrogating him concerning the night of the murder when Arbuthnot spent the crucial hours around the time of death of Cassetti chatting to a young America, MacQueen, hence a person to be counted as a probable witness of what happened. Here is part of what he has to say:

“But I liked this young fellow. He’d got hold of some tomfool idiotic ideas about the situation in India; that’s the way of Americans – they’re so *sentimental* and *idealistic*. Well, he was interested in what I had to tell him. I’ve had nearly thirty years experience of the country. And I was interested in what he had to say about the financial situation in America. Then we got down to world politics in general.”⁶¹

Arbuthnot’s benevolent judgemental attitude shows he has a high opinion of himself. Christie’s criticism of the colonel resides in the fact that she implies that Arbuthnot fails to realise that he likes the young American not because of his character, intelligence or other positive traits, but because the man listens to him instead of attacking his British stance! We induce that MacQueen had indeed questioned the British position on India (“He’d got hold of some tomfool idiotic ideas about the situation in India”) and that Arbuthnot ‘put him right’ on the issue!

Following Christie’s implicit criticism of the colonel, what, of course, is decisive here is that we are given neither MacQueen’s criticisms, nor Arbuthnot’s defence of British policy in India, or of colonialism in general. Arbuthnot takes it for granted that he is (morally) right. And this is crucial, for it is part of his general, moral and ideological stance, which for Arbuthnot justifies the fact that he is part of both the jury and the ‘firing squad’ that ‘executes’ Cassetti. Indeed, when questioned by Poirot, Arbuthnot replies, “say what you like, trial by jury is a sound system”.⁶²

Three core matters derive from the preceding argument. First, colonialism and Empire – the socio-economic and ideological structures that constitute such entities – are taken for granted and constitute the (unstated) backdrop and unseen determinant of the novel, as happens in a number of English novels, (Austen, to name but one). Second, Arbuthnot takes for granted the correctness of his moral/political position, and as a British soldier and officer he is in the forefront of defending the Empire – a concrete illustration of the preceding general point. Third, Christie’s position on the topic of colonialism is not clear. On the one hand she has offered no concrete arguments on Arbuthnot’s part and then offers no concrete criticisms of the colonel’s position. On the other hand Christie has Poirot criticize him, as well as criticising him herself in other parts of the novel, as in the following extract:

⁶¹ Ibid., 170-171, emphasis added.

⁶² Ibid., 175.

“I can assure you that Miss Debenham could not possibly be indicated.”

“You feel warmly in the matter,” said Poirot with a smile.

Colonel Arbuthnot gave him a cold stare.

“I really don’t know what you mean,” he said.

The stare seemed to abash Poirot. He dropped his eyes and began fiddling with the papers in front of him.

“All this is by the way,” he said. “Let us be practical and come to facts. This crime, we have reason to believe, took place at a quarter past one last night”.⁶³

When Poirot insinuates to Arbuthnot that he is not objective in the matter of Miss Debenham because he is sentimentally involved with her (“you feel warmly in the matter”, with the double play on “warmly”), Arbuthnot demonstrates his intellectual and emotional weaknesses by getting angry and trying to dominate Poirot by giving him “a cold stare” and saying he has not understood what Poirot is driving at. He fails to realise that his anger has betrayed him, since it constitutes for Poirot evidence that his prior hypothesis was right. With another subtle ploy which again Arbuthnot fails to understand, (“The stare seemed to abash Poirot”, where the operative word is “seemed”, thereby denying what the sentence appears to assert, namely that Poirot was ‘abashed’), Poirot changes the subject for he has achieved his goal of ensnaring Arbuthnot and doesn’t want the Colonel to realise that this is so. Hence he pretends shame caused by the Colonel’s hard stare and verbal response. Here Christie adroitly and economically provides us with three features of Arbuthnot’s personality, which concurrently constitute criticisms of the Colonel, adding them on to his air of superiority and moral righteousness she had depicted with equal bravura in Arbuthnot’s report of his conversation with MacQueen, to which I now return.

Immediately following Arbuthnot’s positive evaluation of trial by jury, comes the following extract:

Poirot looked at him thoughtfully for a moment or two.

“Yes”, he said. “I am sure that would be your view”.⁶⁴

The most obvious interpretation is that the tone is somewhat critical, Poirot dissenting not with the position expressed on the concept of trial by jury, but in general with Arbuthnot and his stance. However, he proffers no argument, nor, crucially, must it be forgotten that Poirot himself is part of that colonial system (let us recall Leopold’s Belgian Congo) and that Poirot is returning from helping the French army in Syria. Most ambiguous. The framework is that of Empire and colonialism, but the framework is not filled in.

This indicates lack of analysis and lack of depth. Contrast this with the following extract:

“that your husband does not like me. It’s a small matter, which, in the circumstances, seems to acquire a perfectly ridiculous importance. Ridiculous and immense; for, clearly money is required for my plan,” he reflected; then added, meaningly, “and we have two *sentimentalists* to deal with.”

“I don’t know that I understand you, Don Martin,” said Mrs Gould, coldly, preserving the low key of their conversation. “But, speaking as if I did, who is the other?”

‘The great Holroyd in San Francisco, of course,’ Decoud whispered, lightly. ‘I think you understand me very well. Women are *idealists*; but then they are so perspicacious.’

⁶³ Ibid., 169-170.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 175.

But whatever was the reason of that remark, disparaging and complimentary at the same time, Mrs Gould seemed not to pay attention to it. The name of Holroyd had given a new tone to her anxiety.

...

Decoud admitted that it was possible. He knew well the town children of the Sulaco Campo: sullen, thievish, vindictive, and bloodthirsty, whatever great qualities their brothers of the plain might have had. But then there was that other *sentimentalist*, who attached a strangely *idealistic* meaning to concrete facts. This stream of silver must be kept flowing north to return in the form of financial backing from the great house of Holroyd. Up at the mountain in the strong-room of the mine the silver bars were worth less for his purpose than so much lead, from which at least bullets may be run. Let it come down to the harbour, ready for shipment.⁶⁵

This is, of course Joseph Conrad's magnificent novel *Nostromo*, which engages with capitalism, empire, colonialism on the one hand, and psychology, motivation and personal interest on the other hand, and the interrelationship between social structure and personality – momentous themes, dealt with by Conrad in great analytical depth and subtlety. The extract has been selected because the two lexemes “sentimental” and “idealistic” appear in both Christie and Conrad, both functioning as negative valuers, launching as they do serious accusations as to the validity of the foundations on which the personal judgements emitted by the people in question (Macqueen in Christie and the capitalists Gould and Holroyd in Conrad, both of whom claim they are doing good for the population by espousing capitalism and colonialism). The simple point is that Conrad tackles the subject in depth while Christie skirts round it, since it merely (so to say) forms the backdrop. Despite this criticism, however, such traits pointed out by Christie and criticism of those traits does give rise to contradictions of the type I highlighted above. Stated differently, the ‘aesthetic quality’ of the two works is different, Christie's work remains a detective novel while Conrad's *oeuvre* is an epic.

Now one might argue that it is unfair to compare Conrad with Christie. Though I do not concede the point, if, for the sake of argument, one does compare like with like, then we move to the two main strands in crime fiction – the detective story as entertainment and conservation and the detective story as a vehicle of social criticism.⁶⁶ If one compares Andrea Camilleri's crime novels where Montalbano is the police investigator, with the Poirot and Miss Marples novels, then it again emerges that Camilleri writes serious social novels⁶⁷ with penetrating analytical insights, (though by no means reaching the heights of great writers such as Conrad), while Christie's novels avoid tackling the problems they evoke head on, remaining murky and ambivalent as regards the socio-political issues they raise, thereby fostering the impression that they are basically escapist literature.

Indeed, if one were to count the number of comments devoted to evoking negative stereotypes of Otherness in a novel such as *Murder on the Orient Express*, then the quantity of snide remarks is enormous. Remove them and the novel risks falling apart, not simply for quantitative reasons. This risk is increased n-fold if one adds that the same strictures apply to Christie's intense deployment of comicity.

Murder on the Orient Express calls up the fundamental question of justice and how to define and regulate ‘deviant’ social behavior. But it never answers the questions it poses. A recurrent happening in much crime fiction. One modern filmic example is the American television series “Law and Order” where the issue is raised more than once but never debated.

⁶⁵ Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo* (1904) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 187-188, emphasis added.

⁶⁶ See Douthwaite, *Detective Stories*.

⁶⁷ See Douthwaite, “A Stylistic View of Modality”; “Using Speech and Thought Presentation to Validate Hypotheses Regarding the Nature of the Crime Novels of Andrea Camilleri”.

5. Conclusion: What to Do Next

Since the analyses in sections 2-4 derive from the application of pragmatics and stylistics, may be deemed feasible, if not proven. They constitute the backbone of the paper. However, observations have also been advanced as to possible macro-interpretations, or at least features hypothesised, of the text require further investigation. In this sense one major function of this paper may be claimed to be preparatory. The hypotheses advanced by Makinen, myself and others may, and should, be tested by close reading of the type presented above. The next step would consist of analyzing the entire novel, and then other Christie crime novels, to collect evidence supporting or disproving the contentions made.

The aim is to uncover the ambiguities, relate them both to the characters and what they stand for, and to the other socio-contextual features which go into the constitution of the character: place of birth (hence culture and society), gender, age, social class, political opinions (or, more broadly, point of view/worldview), and so forth. The distribution of stance according to the social identity factors outlined above should provide a strong, if not definitive key, to working out what the deeper significance of Christie's production really is.

The same kind of analysis should be applied to Christie's extensive and wry use of humour.

An important methodological tool that will be required is analysis using corpora. However, as I have tried to demonstrate, the final word lies with pragmatics and stylistics – applied first at sentence level, and then analysed for the constants in linguistic patterns that emerge at text level and how these patterns are correlated to social identity in historical context. Pragmatics and stylistics are eminently suited to his job.