

How does the mind do literary work?

Bi-Directional Perspectives in the Cognitive

Sciences abstract

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Literary linguistics assumes the forms of literature emerge from the human capacity for language. In this view, the regularities and peculiarities of literary form are captured by the machinery of linguistic theory. This paper argues against this assumption, considering evidence from literary forms that do not generalise to the formalisms of linguistic theory. Instead, we argue that the diversity of literary forms indicate that they may be produced by other mental modules which are related to, but distinct from, the linguistic system.

To understand how literary forms may require specific systems, we discuss the interpretation of metricality. Following Fabb & Halle (2008), we show that metricality is best captured by form-specific computations, rather than by regular phonological processes. The empirical advantages of this theory are shown here by the scansion of loose meters, which the extra-linguistic metrical system explain in a way that strictly phonological systems cannot (Fabb 2008).

We then consider whether syntax may be given a similar explanation. The syntax of poetic texts can be highly unusual, often contrived to meet the demands of formal characteristics like metricality or parallelism. As with meter, these literary forms are often analysed as products of a ‘poetic syntax’ (Fowler 1966; Austin 1984; Fitzgerald 2007), a variation on the standard syntax; however, we show that these systems cannot generate the variety of syntactic forms found in literary texts. Instead we demonstrate that these forms are generated by a separate mental system which obeys general principles of mental compu-

tation. This system is shown to be removed from syntax just like the metrical system is removed from phonology.

To conclude, we consider the possible relationship between these two extralinguistic mental systems. This evidence provides a clear indication that literary linguistics need not assume that the forms of literature are a natural outgrowth of linguistic systems. The variety of forms in literature indicate an ontologically radical theory of how the mind processes literature has significant advantages, both empirically, in accounting for a greater range of forms, and theoretically, in opening the way towards a more coherent theory of literary form.

References

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