Baltic Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture Vol. 5, 2015: 4–15
https://doi.org/10.22364/BJELLC.05.2015.01

TO THE QUESTION OF EGOCENTRIC DEIXIS: THE OPENING OF CHILDHOOD MEMOIR

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Abstract. Fludernik's (1996: 13) view of *narrativity* in terms of *experientiality* makes the centre of narrative consciousness a more essential characteristic of narrative than the presence of a plot. Significantly, this consciousness – or *point of view* – is generated through deixis, thus, deixis is central to both the embodiment of perception and narrative comprehension. Grounded in the deictic shift theory (presented in Duchan, Bruder and Hewitt (1995); and articulated most clearly in Stockwell (2002)), the research aims at finding marked patterns of deictic shifts pertaining to the openings of childhood memoir. The literary context of the given study is limited to the Irish subgenre, and the two memoirs for analysis are Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996), and Hugo Hamilton's *The Speckled People* (2003). The application of the chosen methods to the opening segments reveals some regularities in the use of deictics, namely, a high frequency of first-person pronouns, such as chained *I*, *my*, and *we* as a textual indicator of intermentality, as well as pop-shifts from *I* to *we* and the obligatory shift to *you*. Other observed patterns include the voiding of the narrator and temporal shifts from the past to the present.

Key words: deixis, deictic shifts, personal pronouns, DST, childhood memoir, focalizing WHO, focalized WHO

INTRODUCTION

The broader principle underlying the study is that 'when a character's speech or thought are represented, we see things, even if momentarily, from that character's point of view' (Simpson, 2004: 85). Further, accepting Fludernik's (1996: 13) definition of *narrativity* in terms of *experientiality*, we also accept her proposition that the centre of narrative consciousness filtering actions and events is a more essential characteristic of narrative than the presence of a plot. Significantly, this consciousness – or *point of view* – is generated through deixis central to both the embodiment of perception and narrative comprehension.

The research is grounded in the deictic shift theory – interdisciplinary work presented in Duchan, Bruder and Hewitt (1995) (henceforth DST) and further developed along cognitive poetic lines by Stockwell (2002) – the theory which 'bases its notion of the presence or lack of a SPEAKER or narrator on specific deictic indicators in a text rather than on a priori argument based on an analogy with ordinary human experience' (Galbraith, 1995: 46). In other words, any point of view must be deictically marked and thus it could be registered through linguistic means.

The object of the study is childhood memoir, the subgenre of literary autobiographical narratives proliferating in recent decades. The childhood memoir, and particularly the specimen of 'troubled' childhood cluttering front shelves of bookshops all around the world, is a comparatively recent invention. Among the traits helping the reader to identify the genre at a glance is the word *A Memoir* either on the cover, on the title page, or at least in the blurb. Definitively, memoir texture is imitated storytelling with the narrative voice of the underage narrator strongly present. As such it abounds in patterns characteristic of spoken discourse and is meant not to be discordant with the protagonist's age.

The memoirs chosen for the analysis, namely, Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996), and Hugo Hamilton's *The Speckled People* (2003), both belong to the prominent Irish subgenre, and both stood long on bestsellers lists (thought McCourt's book is arguably the most celebrated in the trend). The given study is focussed on the openings of the two childhood memoirs and it is an application of the chosen methods to a segment of the first chapter of *Angela's Ashes* (1996) and the first chapter in full of Hugo Hamilton's *The Speckled People* (2003).

Given the idea of approaching literary representations of storytelling with the methods of narrative analysis (see Fludernik, 1996; Norrick, 2000), Labov's (1972: 370) six categories of narrative clauses, namely, the abstract (*what was it about?*), orientation (*who, when, what, where?*), complicated action (*then what happened?*), evaluation (*so what?*), result (*what finally happened?*), and coda (*putting off any further questions*), help in attributing specific functions to the analysed chunks. Locating the study against the background of the work on deixis in general, and DST in particular, the attempt is made to reveal marked patterns in the use of deictic expressions, the patterns helping to link the voice of the older narrator at present with the voice of his younger self. We leave aside any fruitless discussion on whether this evocative opening is a mimesis of the act of storytelling or the act of storytelling itself. Whatever its status might be, the opening for the whole volume is important in 'signing the autobiographical contract' with the reader, to use Lejeune's phrase (1982: 193).

INTRODUCING DEIXIS

In any conversation or a storytelling situation in a shared temporal and spatial context, speakers frequently make direct references to features of the immediate situation, and to do this 'pointing' they use deictic expressions. Primarily discussed in spoken language, deixis in its traditional sense includes 'any grammatical category which expresses distinctions pertaining to the time and place of speaking or to the differing roles of participants' (Trask, 2007: 65–6).

The prototypical deictic categories in speech are founded on the originating **deictic centre** or *zero-point* or *origo* originally developed by Buhler (1934). Serving to anchor the speaker in relation to their surroundings and other participants, '[**e**]***gocentric*** deixis refers to linguistic markers whereby person, place and time are used in relation to the speaker (*I, here, now*). Clearly, person, tense and locative

adverbials are the main carriers of these three deictic dimensions' (Thornbury and Slade, 2006: 85). Hence, the three basic deictic categories are *personal*, *spatial* and *temporal*, and the most representative linguistic expressions used as deictics are demonstratives, first- and second-person pronouns, tense markers, adverbs of time and space and motion verbs (Huang, 2007: 132). However, purely deictic expressions can hardly be isolated and listed, because of the strong role played by the context (ibid.: 133).

When the prototypical speech situation is extended into written language, most often there is no shared perceptual, interpersonal, or memorial field of reference, and

> deixis must be construed with reference to conceptual-linguistic schemata rather than any extralinguistic spatiotemporal and psychosocial dimensions of the immediate situation of-utterance or -reception. (Bruhn, 2005: 387)

As a result, the narrator is seen 'as mediating subject between the reader and the characters' (Galbraith, 1995: 20), and the use of deictic expressions plays a central role in anchoring description to perspective and also co-articulating multiple perspectives. So, the world of a literary work may consist of more than one *deictic field* 'composed of a whole range of expressions each of which can be categorised as perceptual, spatial, temporal, relational, textual and compositional in nature' (Stockwell, 2002: 47), and each set of expressions points to the same deictic centre.

Further, deixis is inseparable from cognition, and the fundamental advance of DST introduced by Zubin and Hewitt (1995) is 'to place the notion of deictic projection as a cognitive process at the centre of the framework' (Stockwell, 2002: 46).

> According to DST, the reader creates a mental model of the story world and then projects, or shifts, her deictic center into that model. That is, in the process of reading, the reader responds to the textual cues provided by the author (who has likewise taken up one or more perspectives within the text in the process of creating it) to construct a deictic coordinate system in the world of the narrative. (Bennet, 2005: 8)

If the narrator shifts the deictic centre of the novel to an earlier point or the reader moves from the role of the real reader to the position of the implied reader, this type of deictic shift is a *push*. By analogy, moving up a level is called a *pop*, and it is best exemplified through a situation when the reader closes the book and goes back to real life. Thus, '[w]hen a deictic shift occurs, it can be either "up" or "down" the virtual planes of deictic fields' (Stockwell, 2002: 47), and it is signalled to the reader by morphological, lexical, syntactical units and elements of textual structure. Cognitive operations that the reader performs to identify the boundaries of deictic fields are called *edgework*. Zubin and Hewitt (1995) pay

special attention to 'textual cohesive devices that are used to signal stability and change in the [deictic centre] of narrative texts' (ibid.: 141), and subdivide deictic operation into *introducing* actors, objects, places, or time intervals, *maintaining* stability, *shifting* and *voiding* as a special case of shifting when one or more deictic centre components become indeterminate (ibid.).

PERSONAL DEIXIS IN FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVE OF CHILDHOOD MEMOIR

In this study we hold the view that personal deixis primarily concerns the encoding of the role of the participants in the speech event in which the utterance in question is delivered (Levinson, 1983: 62), and then any type of pronouns is ascribed different roles. Despite the inclusion of the first-person narrative in general theoretical framework offered by DST, previous research has hardly yielded any specific observations on its account. The neglect may be explained by the assumption that the subjective perspective of the *overt* narrator remains constant throughout the narrative (see Bennett, 2005), and the subtlety of the subjectivity of the third-person narration allured more research than the seemingly stable focalizing WHO ('the participant whose thoughts/perceptions are represented in the story text, or whose point of view is implicit in the description of the scene' (Zubin and Hewitt, 1995: 134)) of the first-person narrative. In fact, although a regular first-person narrative is constrained by the specific perspective of its narrator, there are ways how to manipulate the properties of the WHO through the interaction between its two subcomponents, namely, the focalizing WHO and the focalized WHO ('the participant on whom the Focalizing WHO is focused, isomorphic to the WHO described later' (ibid.)).

First, the narrator may occupy two slots and be both the focalizing and focalized WHO.

> Because the narrator is also the 'speaker' of the text, he is its I; the reader assumes that the person deictic structure of the text reflects this fact, and she therefore expects the narrator to use the first-person pronoun to refer to himself when he is the focalized WHO. The phenomena of self-address and fictional reference, however, make available to the narrator the use of the second person. (Benett, 2005: 24)

Both the first and second person are participants in the communicative situation, the status that the third person definitely lacks. However, unlike the first person, the second person needs not involve the default speaker, which opens the possibility of voiding the focalized WHO. The same effect may be achieved if the first-person-plural or second-person proforms assume generalized meanings (e.g. *we* of 'all humanity', the *you* of 'anyone'). Furthermore, generalized *you* may serve to involve the reader or to distance the narrator.

Also, the plural of the first person is conceptually distinct, for in comparison with the plural of any other (pro)nominal expression *we* does not usually denote multiple instances of *I*, but refers to a group of people including the current speaker. What is more, two basic types of the first person plural pronoun *we* can be distinguished: 'inclusive pronouns, referring to a group of people including both speaker and hearer, and exclusive pronouns, referring to a group of people including only the speaker, i.e., excluding the addressee' (Diessel, 2012: 2415).

Focussing on the analysed material and keeping in mind its specificity, we acknowledge the relative stability of the deictic centre in memoirs of childhood. However, there should also be noted some unavoidable 'assemblage points', they are places where the older narrator meets his younger self and the transition between two points of view should be accommodated by the reader. Predictably, one of such spots should be in the opening where the older narrator has to come in sight at least to claim the non-fictionality of the following narrative (signing the proverbial 'contract' with the reader). So, the transition to the narrative proper enacted by a number of deictic shifts should serve additionally to gain credibility and fuller involvement of the reader.

THE OPENING OF THE CHILDHOOD MEMOIR AND ITS DEIXIS

The material under analysis is an expository segment of the first chapter of Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996) and the first chapter in full of Hugo Hamilton's memoir *The Speckled People* (2003). In each case, the patterns in the use of deictic expressions, namely, personal pronouns, tense forms and occasional adverbial phrases are to be registered, and their function in the interaction with other textual phenomena is to be pointed out. The attempt is to find the idiosyncratic patterns of deictic shifts pertaining to the openings of any Irish memoir of childhood.

ANALYSIS OF *ANGELA'S ASHES* OPENING

In his first memoir Frank McCourt 'employs the historical present and narrates the events of his childhood largely from his perspective as a child at the time of the action' (Phelan, 2005: 3). Although autodiegetic narration (i.e. the narration pertaining to a narrator who is also the protagonist) in the simultaneous present tense is probably the central question of any narratological analysis of this memoir, the primary focus of this study is the gate introducing the reader to the storyworld in Young's terms (2005).

Excerpting the text is comparatively easy if bearing in mind narrative exploitation of intonational factors. As Norrick (2000: 20) puts it: 'Written texts are structures around complete sentences, while spoken language is organized around intonation units.' The more 'realistic' the mode of narration, the more mimetic it is, and, logically, the closer it is to the model of natural storytelling

and its structure. Since the memoir is a literary representation of storytelling, line breaks stand for longer pauses in oral discourse, and, consequently, they graphically frame meaningful segments (or episodes) of the narrative. Actually, literary narrative has appropriated all components of natural narrative (see Labov, 1972), occasionally leaving some out or radically changing their order.

Similarly to the beginning of any natural narrative, the opening of *Angela's Ashes* claims undivided attention:

> My father and mother *should have stayed* in New York where they met and married and where I was born. Instead, they *returned* to Ireland when I was four, my brother, Malachy, three, the twins, Oliver and Eugene, barely one, and my sister, Margaret, dead and gone. (1)

With the modal form 'should have stayed', the opening clause of the first sentence is clearly an evaluation. The directness of the authorial narrative creates an effect of familiarity and the environment of conversational storytelling. The second sentence starts with the immediate spatial shift enacted by the movement predicate 'returned', the verb also hinting at the family's earlier move to New York. Overall, the paragraph pre-empts the whole story told in the first chapter.

Personal deixis is projected and maintained by the first person pronouns 'I' and 'my'; the children are introduced with their names in subject position, which further pushes the reader into the storyrealm, i.e. in the position of the implied reader.

> When I look back on my *childhood* I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a *miserable childhood*: *the happy childhood* is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary *miserable childhood* is the *miserable Irish childhood*, and worse yet is *the miserable Irish Catholic childhood*. (1)

The temporal shift from the simple past to the present simple and the subsequent chaining of the word 'childhood' (repeated 6 times) and the collocation 'miserable childhood' (4 times) foregrounded by the presentative structure 'it was' bring the entire schema of childhood, the schema considerably informed through the discourse itself. The generic use of 'your' here – referring to all/anyone – gives the subsequent claim more credibility. The two inversions with the negative adverbial 'worse' complete the 'miserable' picture. Significantly, popping out from the opening to the frame of the preface helps the reader look from above and locate irony ('happy childhood' is only possible when neighbouring the second person pronoun 'your').

Starting the next paragraph with the claim to universality – 'People everywhere brag and whimper about the woes of their early years' (1) – the narrator shifts from the general focalized WHO of 'people' to the more exclusive 'Irish version' – 'but nothing can compare with the Irish version' (1).

The deictic use of the definite article in 'the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred long years' (1) is particularly interesting. It creates some expectations in the reader as a cataphoric reference, though the explanation never follows, and, recurrent throughout the book, the phrase acquires the status of universal knowledge. Such contextually coined formulas appear in all childhood memoirs; when unquestionably repeated by a child-narrator they serve to ironize these chunks of stale adults' wisdom.

The presentative structure with the preposed (i.e. shifted to the beginning of the clause) adverbial phrase '*Above all* – we were wet' changes the focalised WHO into 'we' in the next paragraph, thus pushing the reader back inside the story framework. The tense shifts back too, and remains the past simple till the appearance of the child-narrator later in the chapter. The ironically poetical balanced sentences create a rhythmical pattern:

> It created a cacophony of hacking coughs, bronchial rattles, asthmatic wheezes, consumptive croaks. It turned noses into fountains, lungs into bacterial sponges. It provoked cures galore: ... (1)

The resulting objective context voids the focalizing WHO of the narrator rendering him omniscient. To support the effect, the reader is further pushed into the storyworld:

> ...to ease the catarrh you boiled onions in milk blackened with pepper; for the congested passages you made a paste of boiled flour and nettles, wrapped it in a rag, and slapped it, sizzling, on the chest. (1)

The generalised 'you' here does not distance the reader from the content matter, but serves to involve the reader. The whole paragraph and the rest of the segment amount to orientation outlining the rainy place of the storyworld.

> Out of the Atlantic Ocean great sheets of rain gathered to drift slowly up the River Shannon and settle forever in Limerick. (1)

The preposed locative adverbial in the form of a nominal phrase is followed by the geographical markers anchoring the further narrative to the specified location. Although Limerick is clearly the main place of action, there is no definitiveness in the temporal coordinates: 'from the Feast of the Circumcision to New Year's Eve' (1) – the temporal adverbial leaves the time hanging in the mist of dampness and past. 'From October to April' (2) – this temporal reference doubles the endless circularity of time created before, and it is echoed in the never-ending circle of church services ('At Mass, Benediction, novenas' (2)).

> Limerick gained a reputation for piety, but we knew it was only the rain. (2)

The focalized WHO of the deictic centre shifts back to 'we', though this time the first-person plural is also enacted by the personal pronouns 'us' and 'our',

making the focalized WHO less of a subject of intention, i.e. a less of intentional and more acted upon entity.

The next nine pages (pp. 2–11) contain the anterior story of the narrator's parents and it is not to be analysed in detail except some comments on personal deixis there. The story is technically outside of the main narrative and is deictically linked to the main plot line with the use of the first person singular 'I' ('When I was a child I would look at my father… When I was thirteen…' (2)), and especially with the possessive 'my' marking all family relatives of the narrator ('my mother', 'my father' etc.). Gradually, however, any trace of the narrative voice disappears giving way to pure storytelling. Its narratability is strengthened by McCourt's authorial gimmick of not putting direct speech in quotation marks.

The opening (or the exposition in literary terms) is evidently over and the story proper starts with the focalization on the child-protagonist. The deictic shift is twofold: the projection is enacted with the first person singular pronouns and the change into the narrative present:

> I'm in a playground on Classon Avenue in Brooklyn with my brother, Malachy. He's two, I'm three. We're on the seesaw. (11)

After that the deictic centre remains tightened to the stable focalizing WHO of the child narrator and the narrative present up to the end of the book.

ANALYSIS OF *THE SPECKLED PEOPLE* OPENING

The first line 'When you're small you know nothing' (1) is clearly an evaluation and it pushes the reader in the realistic frame of telling. The use of the second-person pronoun is not consistent, however, and already in the second paragraph the deictic centre defined by the first person 'I' and 'my' and the deictics of the past tense enables the situation of traditional storytelling. The shift to the present at the end of the paragraph – '… and I thought, maybe she's not laughing at all but crying' (1) – reduces the distance between the focalizing and focalized WHO and as such gives the impression of immediacy.

Opening with the series of nearly identical questions 'How do you know …', thus, echoing the very first sentence, the third paragraph can be classified as second-person narration. It proceeds with the subject chaining 'You know', 'You can see', 'You can hear', etc., and it is marked by the use of the present tense, the mental-state verb and the verbs of perception. The shift to the second person pronoun here is intricate, for it moves 'you' into the position of the focalizing WHO, whereas the scope of WHAT (mother, father, etc.) and spatial deixis (in Ireland) are maintained. This technique moves the reader closer to the protagonist and furthers reader's involvement.

The textual deixis of the next line and the expanded formula of 'When you're small you know nothing. You don't know where you are, or who you are, or what

questions to ask' (2) encode a pop-shift to the level of evaluation. The repetition serves as a refrain raising definite expectations, and it is followed by a due segment of conventional storytelling deictically marked by the simple past tense and first person pronouns.

Starting with 'Then my mother and father did a funny thing.' (2) and throughout the paragraph, the use of the first person pronouns is different in comparison with the preceding segments. The focus on the parents marked by the frequent use of 'my mother', 'my father' towards the end of the paragraph shifts to the focus on the siblings enabled by the use of 'we' and 'us', whereas 'I' occurs only once in the combination 'my brother and I' (2). In Palmer's (2004) terms, the first person plural pronouns here are the textual indicators of *intermentality*, the attribution of shared internal states to a group consisting, in this case, of the narrator and his brother. Significantly, starting from the second chapter and till the end of the book, the personal deixis encodes only these three types of perceptive participants, i.e. the young protagonist, him together with his siblings and, finally, his parents.

The third instance of the modified 'When you're small you're like a piece of white paper with nothing written on it' (3) is followed by an expected push into the storyworld similarly enacted by the deictic use of the first person pronouns 'my' and 'we'. There is no paragraphing and temporal shift after this sentence as it moves on 'My father writes down…' (3), and the effect is of a minor defeated expectancy and increased tempo. The maintenance of the present tense and free direct speech 'my father says your language is your home and your country is your language and your language is your flag' (3) at the end of the paragraph create some ambiguity of address aiding stronger reader's involvement.

In fact, the function of the personal 'your' in the example above is not to be confused with the generic 'you' of the following sentence, namely, 'But you don't want to be special' (3). The next sentence with the spatial shift enabled by the preposed locative adverbials in 'Out *there* in Ireland you want to be the same as everyone else' (3) disambiguates 'you' entirely. Furthermore, 'there' is a perfect example of the use of distal spatial deixis to create emotional distance and invite the objective look through a minor pop out of the narrative.

The feature significantly different from McCourt's memoir is the strong presence of 'they' often brought into the status of the focalized WHO, and the juxtaposed 'us'. It is not surprising, for, in contrast with 'I' and 'we', 'us' is used to talk about how other people affect or are going to affect the narrator(s). The mottle birds of the mixed background, the narrator and his siblings are constantly in a precarious position, and their struggle to come to terms with their identity is arguably the main driving force of the memoir.

Further on, the frequently used first person singular pronoun 'I' usually marks the places of the highest emotional tension as in the episode below:

> ...and I go home and tell my mother I did nothing. But she shakes her head and says I can't say that. I can't deny anything and I can't fight

> back and I can't say I'm not innocent. She says it's not important to win. Instead, she teaches us to surrender, to walk straight by and ignore them. (3)

The subject chaining is usually a maintaining device serving to make the deictic centre even more stable. Here, the shift to the focalized 'she' comes highly unexpected, and as such it foregrounds the contrast as well as the heteroglossia of the narrative (Bicjutko, 2008).

Consisting of singular but thematically important episodes, the rest of the chapter pre-empts the essential conflict faced by the children in the narrative, and, thus, can be considered as a sort of abstract. Another distinctive feature of the narrative is its constant temporal shift from the present to the past and back to the present. The shift either draws the reader nearer or distances him from the action; the fluctuation in projection keeps the reader alert and emotional.

CONCLUSIONS

Starting with personal deixis, both excerpts contain a predictably high frequency of first-person pronouns. However, their distribution is uneven and contextually dependent. Thus, the first person singular 'I' is regularly chained when the stability of the deictic centre is required to foreground the narrator. 'My' is probably the second frequently used first-person pronoun. The use of the first-person plural pronouns, however, is more random, though the presence of 'we' as a textual indicator of 'intermentality' (Palmer, 2004) is paramount. The personal shift from 'I' to 'we' is enacted and functions as a pop, presenting a broader picture of differently formed alliances to public view. Still, the most frequent pronouns are 'I' and 'my', which, in fact, is a norm for fictional and non-fictional first-person narratives (Semino, 2011), and is particularly suitable to the egocentric mind of a child-narrator. The use of the personal pronoun 'us' makes the narrator less of a subject of intention, and, therefore, its appearance and frequency depends on the subject matter of the memoir in question.

The shift to the second-person pronoun 'you' slightly varies in function, but it is an obligatory feature of any memoir opening. The direct reference to the addressee/reader can hardly be found any further than in the first chapter (the exception might be its use in the last closing chapter).

Another pattern observed in memoir openings is the voiding of the narrator in generalisations serving to give more credibility to the autobiographical nature of the memoir and helping the reader with his deeper involvement.

In terms of temporal deixis, the temporal shifts from the past into the present and the other way round are frequent as in any natural narrative, but can hardly be systematized on the basis of the meagre evidence collected in the analysis. The question is whether any such systematization is possible, for temporal shifts very often serve situational and stylistic purposes.

Although both writers actively use textual deixis to provide for the episodic structure of their openings, the authorial arrangements are different. So, McCourt employs the graphological device of an empty line, and Hamilton marks a shift by the proverbial sentence 'When you are small…', which is twice repeated identically and paraphrased for the third time, thus, drawing attention as a textual construct.

All in all, the study was an attempt to look at the deictics in the opening of the childhood memoir and come to some tentative conclusions about their functioning. So, there have been revealed some definite patterns in the use of personal pronouns and tense shifts; despite comparatively frequent preposed locative adverbials, their use appear to be context specific. A quantitative research on a bigger massive of data along the same lines should help with reaching subtler and more precise conclusions.

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