ISSA Proceedings 1998 – Standpoints In Literary Reviews

1. Argumentation in literary reviews

In this paper I want to report about my analysis of the main standpoints in literary reviews from a pragma-dialectical point of view. This first exploration was carried out on a corpus of literary reviews in Dutch newspapers.

The main standpoint in a literary review is a value judgement about the quality of the book as a whole. There are more standpoints to be found in reviews. Reviewers advance arguments to support the acceptability of their standpoint. If they say the book is beautiful, they have to bring in arguments like 'it is well-written, it opens new horizons for the reader' etc. These arguments relate to certain characteristics of the book. They are value judgements on aspects of the book, such as style, reality, innovation, and information. These arguments serve as sub standpoints in the literary reviews, whereas the main standpoint is an utterance about the book as a whole.

2. Standpoints and value judgements

The term 'standpoint' is broader than the term 'value judgement'. A standpoint not only can relate to the truth of propositions but also to their acceptability in a wider sense. Since a judgement may refer to the value of the subject of the utterance, it is a special kind of standpoint.

In literary reviews, the main standpoint is a judgement about the value of the book as a whole (and not about the values of certain aspects like style as pointed out before). Only relative terms can be used to express the value of books. Relative terms are always based on a scale. A scale is defined by two extremes: e.g. beautiful and awful, and the line between these extremes. In my survey, I postulated four different scales, on which the value of a book might be given.

1. The value of the book can be placed on a general scale from positive to negative. The general scale is between beautiful (or any other related positive qualification) and awful (or any other related negative qualification). Unlike the qualifications in the next scales, these qualifications are not exclusive for literature. "*Fear* could have been a terrible book because of all this, but it is a beautiful novel from the very start" (N. Hylkema, *Leeuwarder Courant*,

19-5-1995).
2. The value of the book can also be expressed by comparing a book with a general accepted standard of literature, a 'literary scale'. For example: 'This book is like a new Shakespeare. 'The value of Shakespeare's work is generally accepted, so the book is evaluated in a positive way.**[i]**
3. The value can also be expressed by comparing a book with another book from the same author as in 'This book disappointed me (...). His previous novel was much better. 'This scale can be called an oeuvre-scale. This is an example from the corpus: 'The award has caused quite a stir. That is not so surprising, because the book is an average book that in the light of Llosa's previous works looks particularly pale' (S. de Vaan, de *Volkskrant*, 19-5-1995).
4. The value can also be given within a certain genre as in: 'This book is a moving historical novel.'This utterance doesn't specify the value of this book as a novel, but it does express the value as a historical novel. In this example 'historical novel' can be replaced by all genres: from historical novel to pulp fiction, from experimental novels to thrillers. I called this the genre-scale.**[ii]** Genre is used here in a broad sense: Dutch books can be called a genre as well. I found this example in the corpus: 'Van Teylingen's writings enriched Dutch literature' (J. Diepstraten, de *Gelderlander*, 17-5-1995).

The corpus I examined consisted of all literary reviews in Dutch newspapers, published in an average week (no literary prices, no special literary events, no holidays). The first, general scale was used by far the most: in 18 of the 23 reviews in which the main standpoint was expressed in an assertive. The other scales were used rarely if ever.

3. Propositions, to which the main standpoint can be related
A proposition refers to something and adjudges a certain predicate to that something. Three kinds of propositions are distinguished: descriptive, evaluative and inciting propositions. Descriptive propositions describe facts or events. Evaluative propositions express an assessment of facts or events. Inciting propositions call on to prevent or to enhance a particular event or course of action (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, 1992: 159). This distinction is important for the analysis of the argumentation in literary reviews because different types of propositions are connected with different types of arguments. And conversely: a certain type of argument presupposes a certain type of standpoint. Is it possible to predict to which kinds of propositions the main standpoint in literary reviews

can be related?

1. Can the main standpoint be related to a descriptive proposition?
The answer must be no, because the arguments to support descriptive propositions are factual arguments: you need facts to support a standpoint related to a descriptive proposition. The main arguments in a literary review to support the main standpoint are judgements and not facts, so the main standpoint can not be related to a descriptive proposition.
2. Can the main standpoint be related to an evaluative proposition?
This seems to be pre-eminently the kind of proposition to which the main standpoint in literary reviews is related. This is for two reasons. Evaluative propositions are supported by arguments that express values or a hierarchy of values, as Peter Houtlosser stresses (Houtlosser 1995: 176). The argumentation in literary reviews consists of sub standpoints in which judgements are expressed about the value of different aspects of the book. So the argumentation expresses values.

Besides that, there is a hierarchy of importance between these aspects, reflecting the reviewer's overall opinion about literature. For example: a reviewer is positive about the style and negative about the innovative character of a novel. His main standpoint can be negative, if he considers innovation to be the main function of novels. So there is also a hierarchy of values. These two characteristics of argumentation in literary reviews (expressing values, not independent values because these values are hierarchical anyway) point out that the evaluative proposition is pre-eminently the kind of proposition the standpoint can be related to.

3. Is it possible that the main standpoint is related to an inciting proposition?
An inciting proposition calls on to prevent or to enhance a particular event or course of action. (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, 1992: 159). That can be so in the main standpoint in a literary review, for example in 'My opinion is that this book should be read world-wide'. So far, the main standpoint has been given the following characteristics: it is a value judgement about the quality of a book as a whole; this value is expressed on a scale; it can be related to evaluative and inciting propositions.
4. Different speech acts and the main standpoint in literary reviews
The speech act 'to advance a standpoint' is an assertive. According to Peter Houtlosser the speech act to advance a standpoint must be seen as a complex

speech act, as is argumentation (Houtlosser 1995: 75). That means that an utterance can be analysed at a higher textual level as a standpoint while on sentence level it may actually be a non-assertive. Peter Houtlosser also stresses that not only assertives but also other speech acts can lead to a difference of opinion. These speech acts must be reconstructed as standpoints in an analysis. The reconstructed standpoints are virtual standpoints. A value judgement is a certain kind of standpoint, so it is an assertive. Peter Houtlosser stated that other speech acts also might lead also to a difference of opinion. Which speech acts can be used to express the main standpoint in a literary review?

a. Suppose the only utterance about the quality of the book as a whole is: 'This book should be read world-wide'.

This example illustrates that the main standpoint can be an advice. Language users recognise this advice as a value judgement. An advice is not an assertive but a directive. This directive can be reconstructed on textual level as the (in the example: positive) main standpoint.

b. Suppose the main standpoint is expressed in 'I promise never to read a book from this author again'.

To promise is a commissive speech act. On textual level this utterance can be reconstructed as a value judgement. In this example the judgement must be negative: the reviewer's promise never to read these books again is not very recommending.

c. The main standpoint can also be expressed as in 'Reading this book made me very happy'. This utterance is an expressive. But it can be reconstructed as the main standpoint on textual level. The qualification appears to be positive, assuming that only good books can make the reader happy.**[iii]**

In literary reviews a special kind of expressive can be distinguished. In some of the reviews I examined I found remarks in which the subjective character of the judgement remains implicit. For example: 'This book is really moving.' An utterance like this must be characterised as an expressive. But the expressive is made impersonal, the phrase suggests that the book is moving for every reader. It differs from the utterance 'this book made me happy' because the personal experience is generalised. I called this kind of expressive a 'depersonalised expressive'.**[iv]** I believe that depersonalised expressives can be found very often in reviews, but this needs further research.

4. Can main standpoints in literary reviews be expressed by declaratives?

Declaratives are speech acts by means of which the speaker creates the state of affairs that is expressed in the propositional content. Usually declaratives are performed in more or less institutionalised contexts, – such as court proceedings, religious ceremonies – in which it is clear who is authorised to perform a particular declarative. When the referee in the championship says: 'the ball is out', so it will be, whatever all the British football fans may say (or do). When the reviewer says: 'this book is good', his utterance doesn't influence the reality: it doesn't change the quality of the book. Therefor I think main standpoints in literary reviews can not be expressed by declaratives.**[v]**
What are the differences between main standpoints, expressed in an assertive (not to be reconstructed) and reconstructed main standpoints expressed in a non-assertive? First, the reconstructed main standpoint can only be reconstructed in positive or negative ways. If a reviewer writes: 'read this book', the qualification is positive. If he writes 'don't ever read this book', the qualification is negative. Because it can only be reconstructed as positive or negative, the qualification behind reconstructed main standpoints is less specific than in standpoints like 'this book is better than his last one' (an assertive). Second, a reconstructed standpoint is always explicit, whereas a standpoint that has not yet been reconstructed may be very vague, like: 'this book might be the start of an international career'. So far the main standpoint in literary reviews can be expressed by all different speech acts, except for declaratives. They must be reconstructed on a textual level as explicitly positive or negative judgements.

5. Unexpressed main standpoints

If the main standpoint is unexpressed, only argumentation provokes a clue for the reconstruction of the main standpoint.
First: when only positive judgements of aspects (or: the sub standpoints, the arguments) are given, the main standpoint must be reconstructed as positive. Only if one aspect is judged as negative, the judgement of the book as a whole might already be negative: the negatively judged aspect might have a very high place in the hierarchy of the values. Analysis of the corpus shows, that the repetition of a negatively judged aspect may emphasise the negatively judgement so much, that this aspect seems to be a decisive criterion. The judgement can also be negative to such a degree that it becomes very important compared to the other (positively judged) aspects.
Second: the main standpoint can also be unexpressed (no utterance can be found about the quality of the book as a whole), whereas evaluative utterances with a

broader reference can be found. For example: ‘Daphne Meyer is a good writer’.
In these cases, one level in the argumentation scheme is left out. The argumentation scheme can be reconstructed as: Daphne Meyer is a good writer. Good writers write good books. This book is written by Daphne Meyer, so this book is a good book. In the corpus I found this example: ‘All this together inconspicuously turns IJlander into a writer whose entire oeuvre you want to read after the very first acquaintance’(L. Oomens, *Algemeen Dagblad*, 19-5-1995).

6. Requirements for the main standpoint in literary reviews
Eveline Brandt (1994) developed four requirements for the main standpoint in literary reviews: it must be well considered, and supported by arguments; it must be easy to recognise as the main standpoint and formulated without any ambiguity. How can be decided whether the reviewer meets these general requirements?
1. Whether a main standpoint is well considered or not, is depending on the required attitude of the reviewer towards his work. Only the verbal presentation can show whether he meets this demand. And only argumentation can show whether the main standpoint is well considered or not.
2. The second requirement deals with argumentation to support the standpoint. In an analysis of the main standpoint the argumentation gets more important when the main standpoint is unexpressed. And if the main standpoint is unexpressed, the demand for an easy-to-recognise and unequivocal argumentation becomes stronger. The main standpoint can only be reconstructed if the judgements of certain aspects and the hierarchy between those aspects is made clear (outspoken or suggested by repetition).
3. The third requirement is that the main standpoint should be easy to recognise. The notion ‘recognisibility’ is a relative notion. Whether a main standpoint is easy to be recognised, is influenced by the next elements:
– explicit and implicit language use;
– the position of the main standpoint in the text;
– the repetition of the main standpoint.**[vi]**
4. The fourth requirement is that the main standpoint should be unequivocal, not ambiguous. The main standpoint can be ambiguous on the level of the sentence as well as on wider, textual level.**[vii]**
– If just one utterance can be identified as the value judgement, the main standpoint can be ambiguous in two ways. The scale of the value can be ambiguous (as in: ‘This is the best Thai historical novel, ever translated in Dutch’)

and the qualification of the book can be ambiguous (as in: 'This book needs a lot of attention from the reader'). There are value judgements in both last examples, but the value remains unclear.
– Sometimes two utterances can be identified as the main standpoint. If so, it is not always clear which of the utterances expresses the main standpoint the best. The two (or more) utterances can be more or less contradictory, as in: 'This book claims to be an old masterpiece, but isn't one.' (…) 'I wonder why this was translated.' (…) 'If the writer aimed to write an catching erotic story, he succeeded.' (H. Pos, *Trouw*, 19-5-1995) This is an ambiguity on textual level.

7. Some examples taken from the corpus
After this theoretical, first exploration of the main standpoint in literary reviews, some quotations can illustrate the complexity of the analysis. In the analysis, the theoretically assumed characteristics were very helpful.
1.
'The award has caused quite a stir. That is not so surprising, because the book is an average book that in the light of Llosa's previous works looks particularly pale. (…) Anyone who enjoyed the breathtaking plot, the technical wizardry and the elaborate themes and the pageturning epic narrative in previous works will feel cheated. The book lacks tension. (…) The dialogues are generally anaemic and sometimes even trivial and the saccharin conclusion is disappointing, to put it mildly. (…) If it had been an anti-climax to an otherwise thrilling book it would have been acceptable, but the rest of the book is not exactly breathtaking either (…)' (S. de Vaan, de *Volkskrant*, 19-5-1995).

Three value judgements can be found in these quotes.
– The first utterance (it is an average book) is an assertive, and the value is placed on a general scale.
– The second utterance (it looks particularly pale in the light of Llosa's previous works) is also an assertive and the value is placed on the oeuvre-scale.
– The third utterance (anyone who enjoyed his previous works, will feel cheated) repeats the judgement expressed in the second utterance. But here it is expressed in a 'depersonalised expressive.'

2.
'His texts belong to the best that has been written in Dutch and wouldn't it be beautiful for this work to be spread as widely as possible. (…) This fragment is taken from the story 'the carrot in the letterbox', that, although it's title is not as

beautiful as most of them, it's solid and strong construction make it one of the best stories I have ever read. (…) Finally I would like to conclude with a sentence suitable for the blurb on the back of Berckmans next book: I still don't understand why every household in the country does not have the complete works of J.M. Berckmans on their bookshelves' (R. Giphart, het *Parool*, 19-5-1995).

The first part of the first sentence in this quote is an assertive. The proposition is evaluative and the value is placed on the 'genre-scale'. In the second half of the first sentence, a wish is expressed indirectly. It is not an assertive but an indirect speech act, which can be interpreted as a wish. Then again this wish contains an indirect advice for readers. Strictly spoken, the second sentence is not a judgement of the book as a whole, only a judgement of one of the stories. But the judgement is so positive, that the book as a whole must be positive. The value is placed on a very large scale: everything this reviewer ever read. And reviewers do read a lot; it is their profession. So this judgement of one part, reinforces the judgement of the book as a whole. The value judgement in the third sentence is hidden behind a promise, a commissive. And this commissive contents also an advice for readers.

3.
'I swear, I have read this book right through, I have not shied away from this mugful of lard but I would seriously advise against even picking this book up, because it is so greasy it will slip through your fingers. And in case you are still interested in it, it will be a great pleasure for me to give it to you as a present. In Witte's own words: 'do me a chip sandwich – oh, and heavy on the mayonaise'. This way at least you are sure your are dealing with an unhealthy mouthful (…)' (A. Koopmans, *Apeldoornse Courant,* 17-5-1995).
It is very clear: the reviewer judges this book as an awful one. In the first sentence he assures the reader that his judgement is well considered, he did his job and read this book through. This judgement is expressed in an advice. Later on it is expressed in an expressive, and the expressive also contents a commissive.

4.
'The reader travels along with them to the heart of the catastrophe, an experience that makes a deep impression, just as Lynn Pan's other journeys through China's life and history (…)' (anonymous, *Barneveldse Courant*, 20-5-1995).
This main standpoint is hidden in a short sideline. The utterance 'makes a deep impression' is the main standpoint, an expressive. The reviewer suggests with his

words that his personal experience will be shared together with all readers, but in fact it is his own and personal experience. It is a so-called ‘depersonalised expressive’.

5.
‘In the first story of this collection I found literary confirmation of the fact that she is a real writer. (…) Her writings are not limited to just being descriptive, but are always permeated by an emotion that goes beyond that’ (J. Bernlef, *NRC Handelsblad*, 19-5-1995).
Real writers write real books. Real books are good books. So the reviewers’ judgement is positive. In the second quote he specifies what real writers do.

6.
‘A direct beginning like this can be found quite often in IJlanders’s work. It is his way of introducing the subject of the story directly at the beginning. They are all examples of IJlander’s narrating skills. That is how IJlander has inconspicuously become a writer whose whole oeuvre one would like to read after the first acquaintance’ (L. Oomens, *Algemeen Dagblad*, 19-5-1995).
This was the only utterance in this review, which could be identified as the main standpoint. But it is not an utterance about the quality of the book as a whole. The main standpoint is unexpressed here. The main standpoint is hidden in an utterance about an authorship, it is easy to reconstruct as a positive judgement about the book in question: you are curious about a whole oeuvre, if your judgement of one specimen is positive. So the value judgement is clear, while the main standpoint is unexpressed.

7.
‘While reading Yoshimoto’s collection of stories I was constantly reminded of my experiences with the Japanese cuisine. Like most Japanese food Yoshimoto’s writings are not exactly pushy. You have to conquer it, discovering the qualities in a careful and concentrated way. He who puts his mind to it shall not be disappointed but will at the same moment discover that the distance in Yoshimoto’s work comes with a price tag (…) To remain in culinary terms, despite their ingredients the taste of her stories remains often insipid. While dining you might feel it is time again to order a hearty steak au poivre’ (H. Bouwman, de *Volkskrant,* 19-5-1995).

This value judgement is expressed by a comparison, not a comparison with other

literature, but with the Japanese kitchen. Such a comparison is an indirect speech act. The reviewer transformed his reading experience, being a mixed visual and intellectual sensation, into a taste sensation. More than one utterance can be identified as main standpoint, as the quotes show. The value can be paraphrased as 'pretty good, but now for something completely different'. A bit positive, a bit negative. The value judgement is unequivocal.

NOTES

i. This scale differs form the general scale: the comparison is not only qualifying but also characterising. If the reviewer compares a book with Shakespeare, the book differs from one, which is compared to Dostojewsky's, although both writers have a position in the literary canon.

ii. I postulated one last scale, which is connected to the former one: a debut-scale. Debuts can not be seen as a genre, but an utterance like 'this book is a strong debut' is very much like 'this book is a good regional novel'.

iii. Awful books can make the reader happy as well, but in that case the reader must have special reasons for this strange effect. Without any further explanation, utterances like 'this book made me happy' or 'I felt awful reading this book' must be reconstructed as positive and negative qualifications.

iv. In Holland many publications can be found, in which reviewers discuss the subjective character of reviews. This discussion comes up very often. This attention to the subjective character of a value judgement sheds a new light upon this depersonalized way of expressing the value of a book.

v. An exception must be made for the usage declaratives. The usage declarative points to another speech act, so they can't be interpreted as the main standpoint. If they occur in a literary review and point at the main standpoint, the main standpoint is easier to recognise.

vi. For that matter: repetition not only influences whether the main standpoint is easy to recognise, it also determines the confidence with which the main standpoint is brought forward.

vii. Once again a reason to analyse the main standpoint on textual level.

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