

## Review

Michael Toolan, *Narrative Progression in the Short Story, a corpus stylistic approach*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2009.

Reviewed by  
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Michael Toolan published the first edition of his book, *Narrative, a critical linguistic introduction*, in 1988, and the second in 2001. As its subheading states, this useful volume, introducing the relevant work of many scholars, was especially helpful as a teaching reference; its acknowledgements record that “much of the material presented here has been used on courses in Stylistics or Narrative ... and all kinds of small debts are owed to students on those courses.” In contrast, Toolan’s most recently published book on narrative, here reviewed, is a record of the author’s original research, in methodology and results. It is therefore quite different in style, carefully detailed and systematic, claims made modestly but exhaustively exemplified. Yet its important questions, such as those of suspense and surprise, were raised in the earlier *Narrative, a critical linguistic introduction*, and the literary texts examined are in many cases the same texts as those mentioned in the *introduction*. This is not a flaw, but rather an advantage for anyone coming new to the area of linguistic studies of narrative; the earlier volume can serve specifically as an introduction to the later.

Each of the three nominal groups in Toolan’s title deserves its own comment: *Narrative Progression in the Short Story, a corpus stylistic approach*. First, narrative progression: what is meant by this? Meanings for the word “narrative” are (notoriously?) contested. Thus Ansgar Nünning, listing “a selective survey of new developments and approaches in narrative studies and of some of their major proponents,” itemises eight broad categories of narrative studies, each including several schools/approaches with different practitioners.<sup>1</sup> This warns us that any scholarly study of “narrative” must make explicit what is being meant by the term. Similarly, a reader in turn must pay attention to such explication. What does Toolan tell us?

Narratologists, he writes in Chapter 1, often regard “impressionistic reader judgements” (such as ones of “suspense, surprise, secrecy or gaps, mystery, tension, obscurity, and even incoherence”) as “core ingredients of ‘narrativity’: the sense of narrative dynamism or progression that a reader ascribes to the text.” (p 2) This expectation of narrative continuation can be described from two perspectives: “From the point of view of the reader, I call this *narrative expectation*, whereas looked at as the elements of text design that cause expectation it is often termed *prospection*.” (p 113) Avoiding the accusation of a simple “structuralist” approach, Toolan acknowledges the inter-relation of text and context in a reader’s understanding, but “a

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<sup>1</sup> Ansgar Nünning, “Narratology or Narratologies? Taking stock of recent developments, critique and modest proposals for future usages of the term,” in *What is Narratology?* editors Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller. Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003, for Figure 3, pp 249-250. Michael Toolan appears in “Category 6. Linguistic Approaches/Contributions to Narratology,” one of seven names in the sub-category “Linguistics, Stylistics and Narratology.”

text must contain some words, some language, before it can rise to contextual inferential interpretation by the reader.” (p 113) A linguistic study of narrative continuation in narrativity will therefore be a study of prospection. In the course of his study, Toolan will identify eight textual features as highly significant parameters of prospection, so that, by his concluding chapter, he can write: “An extreme corollary of this privileging of the nominated eight parameters is the prediction that a modern short story without instantiations of all or most of these parameters would be devoid of narrativity or powers of prospection, and as a consequence would not prompt focussed reader expectations.” (p 190)

In that last quote, “the Short Story” of the book’s title has gained the classifier “modern”. Toolan acknowledges the historical specificity of his literary sample, and hence, perhaps, the specificity of his results to writing of that period: “Representative 20<sup>th</sup> century short stories (by James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, Raymond Carver, Alice Munro, and others) are the ‘test-bed’ for all the procedures and commentary that follow, so it must be emphasized that the effects of narrative progression identified here may be distinctive of just the modern short story genre.” (p 1) I would qualify this possible limitation further with a literary term: “just the modernist short story genre.” Though the authors span the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Carver died in 1988, Munro, now in her 80s, published her most recent work in 2009), their writing can be distinguished from some other modern writing, post WWII, given the literary label “postmodernist”. (Early 20<sup>th</sup> century modernist writing, whether influenced directly or indirectly by new ideas emerging in philosophy and science - Henri Bergson’s qualitative time of experience, Einstein’s relativity of spacetime - embraced a subjective narrative dominated by character perception and associations, but retained the persistence of character identity. Contrast this with, for example, the effacement of identity in Paul Auster’s postmodern writing.)

Finally, “a corpus stylistic approach.” Toolan analyses his chosen stories (which include Joyce’s “Two Gallants,” Mansfield’s “Bliss,” Carver’s “Cathedral,” “Boxes” and “A Small Good Thing,” John Updike’s “A&P” and Munro’s “The Love of a Good Woman”) against a reference corpus which he compiles (which does not contain these stories); the corpus, of some 50,000 words, contains 20C novel and short story fiction by British and North American authors, and “can be no more than a sample of the range of most frequently-taught and –studied 20<sup>th</sup> century short fiction.” (p 28)

Toolan’s discussion of his method, and its relation to previous scholarly work, is meticulous: Chapters 1 to 6 are a preparation for Chapters 7 and 8, in which Toolan describes the eight parameters to which ‘high narrativity prospection’ is attributed. Chapter 9 then tests the model previously described, while Chapter 10 points forward to future work in this field.

In Chapter 1, “Introduction, Narrative prospecting,” Toolan situates his Category 6 approach (in Nünning’s catalogue) in relation to the work of other scholars, including those of reader processing. Interestingly he mentions the theories of cognitive psychologists and psycholinguists which could be relevant to studies of literary expectation but which “have only rarely been taken up and applied by literary linguists”. On the other hand, he excludes from consideration various “influential narratological studies ... since none of these focuses on the strictly text-linguistic.” (p3)

Chapter 2, “Collocation and corpus stylistics,” briefly describes the collocational theory of Firth, and its development: by Halliday and Hasan in textual cohesion, and, using corpus studies, by Sinclair on prospection and by Hoey on lexicogrammatical priming. Reassuringly (to this reviewer), Toolan is both a scholar of corpus and a reader of text: he writes that “the narrativity patterns explored in this book must not be so profound or hidden as to be beyond the attention of the reasonably careful reader; otherwise claims about their subtle instrumentality in guiding the reader can be too easily dismissed as psychologically implausible.” (p 23) (This caution reminds me of that of Halliday in his discussion of prominence as motivated foregrounding, rather than mere statistical occurrence.<sup>2</sup>)

Chapter 3, “Lexical patterns in short stories,” describes the use of various corpus techniques and existing packages (such as *WordSmith Tools*) to identify patterns in Joyce’s short story “Two Gallants”. One important observation (derived from a detailed study of the phrase ‘achieved the stern task of living’) is that “almost the first thing a language approach to verbal narrative has to emphasise is that a significant part of the telling is often achieved by the rich web of what is not said, but is probably implicated, in the language used.” Toolan suggests a reconciliation between corpus linguistic analysis and a Gricean approach to implicature: “it might be more accurate to say that the one analysis entails and builds on the other, so that both are needed, at distinct levels: the corpus linguistic awareness (however tacit) of the unusual or ‘anti-primed’ precedes and licences the more elaborate and discursive but speculative conjecturing of implicatures.” (p 47) The chapter ends with a Keyword analysis generated from WordSmith (keywords are those disproportionately frequent in a text, relative to the frequency of those words in a large corpus).

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 all use findings from corpus analysis to explore the functions of repetitions and near-repetitions in the narrative progression.

In Chapter 4: “Top keyword sentences as story waymarking,” Toolan suggests that a “story’s most key keyword, which is very often the proper name of a main character, may have an important story-structuring role.” (p 53) He generates an abridgment for each story studied, in which only the sentences containing the top proper noun keyword are included. He concludes that though such repeated words promote coherence, the abridgment may lack material most relevant to the “story’s theme or plot”. Other key elements are needed.

Chapter 5: Keywords and the language of guidance in “The Love of a Good Woman,” focuses on lexical patterning in a short story by Alice Munro. Toolan showed the Preface only (it is a long short story!) to different groups of informants to elicit readers’ responses to the question: are there any words or sentences ... that you feel are especially relevant to how the story proceeds...? The full short story was then studied with corpus analytic methods. Finally, the story was divided into five segments and the keyword collocations of each segment studied; these word-listings

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<sup>2</sup> M.A.K. Halliday, “Linguistic function and literary style: an inquiry into the language of William Golding’s *The Inheritors*,” first published in 1971 in *Literary Style: a symposium*, ed. Seymour Chatman. (Oxford U.P.) Reprinted in M.A.K. Halliday, *Explorations in the Functions of Language*. London: Edward Arnold, 1973, pp 103-143.

appeared “rather more coherent, and more amenable to some attempt at a narrativising synthesis.” (p 93)

Chapter 6: “Repetition and para-repetition in story structure,” continues the analysis of Munro’s story, divided now into 26 subsections for the study of disproportionately frequent lexical and grammatical words. But the chapter’s detail leads Toolan to conclude that “an exclusive focus on lexical frequency and repetition is too narrow an approach, and disproportional.” (p 112) For example, Keyword recognition cannot identify what Toolan calls ‘para-repetitions’: the same phenomenon evoked at different places in the text “by different (but related, synonymous, or associated) phraseology”. (p 103)

Having now concluded that “a multi-factor modelling of narrative progression is needed,” Toolan outlines such a model of eight parameters in Chapters 7 and 8.

Chapter 7: “Prospection and expectation, Core signalling,” describes the first four parameters, which Toolan describes as “more ‘atomic’ and overt kinds of signals” (p 135):

1. sentences containing high frequency keyword character names
2. sentences with narrative-tense finite verbs in character-depicting action clauses
3. opening sentences of narrative paragraphs
4. sentences carrying lexical keywords and clusters.

Chapter 8: “Prospection and expectation, Embedded signalling” describes the second four parameters, which are “devices with a longer reach, often with a discursal rather than merely sentential or clausal presence” (p 135):

5. sentences carrying characters’ represented thought
6. prospective directive speech (questions, requests/directives, undertakings and future-oriented informs, p 145)
7. negated propositions
8. projecting modal or mental process verbs.

To implement the model with a particular story, Toolan then selects an “abridgement” of “Two Gallants,” which is a version which contains only those sentences which carry one or more of the eight types of “prospection cue”. The goal is to identify “that material most centrally involved in narrative progression” but at this stage, Toolan notes, the identification results in “a work in progress best approximation”. (p 161) Toolan is admirably scientific in his claims: the work is “still at a preliminary stage, needing further analysis and testing.” For a succinct “Summary of the eight proposed parameters (and search procedures) of narrative prospection,” see Figure 4 (p 164).

Chapter 9, “The textual tracking of suspense and surprise,” as earlier noted, returns to questions previously explored in Toolan (2001), with some assistance from the model of prospection just described. Toolan examines “textualising suspense” in Joyce’s “Two Gallants,” and “textualising surprise” in Mansfield’s “Bliss” and Carver’s “A Small, Good Thing.” The interplay of corpus analysis and literary response is most noticeable in this chapter (as in Toolan’s comment on the end of “Two Gallants”: “That Lenehan’s suspense is ‘released’ we infer from the brilliantly judged final sentence of the story.” p 179). In Toolan’s approach, this interplay is a necessity, not

an embarrassment. The book's first chapter began: "the crucial question: how does text 'guide' the reader?" At the end of chapter eight, after the analytically precise description of the eight parameters of heightened narrativity, Toolan writes, "Now my hope is that it might be possible to show on independent grounds (e.g. in readers' responses) that the parameters especially contribute to a story's narrativity, i.e. a reader's sense of the narrative's progression." (p 163)

In his final chapter, Toolan writes that, in promoting this corpus stylistic approach, he has hoped "to demonstrate the usefulness of some kinds of relatively simple and relatively automatic searches". It is a virtue of this book that it is not pretentious in its claims, but that what it does set out to do it presents clearly and thoroughly. Moreover, Toolan's own appreciation of and respect for literary art is evident, and it is not irrelevant for me here to comment that *Narrative Progression in the Short Story* is itself gracefully written, and conversationally aware of the reader's presence and need to be engaged.