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**Re-discovering Identities. Language and Point of View in Scott's *True Country*.**

**Abstract I:** In this article I examine one of the early works by Australian Aboriginal writer Kim Scott, *True Country*. Drawing on studies of 'point of view' and 'modality', the present work tries to capture the troubled identities of Aboriginal communities in Australia and the process of growth and consciousness undergone by the protagonist. The article also highlights how fictional characters can be shaped and presented through their words and thoughts, thus involving the reader in a dialogistic relationship with the topic treated. Hence, the narrative structure is characterized by continuous shifts of perspective.

**Abstract II:** L'articolo esamina uno dei primi lavori dello scrittore australiano Kim Scott, *True Country*. Il presente lavoro cerca di catturare le identità inquiete degli aborigeni d'Australia, oltre al processo di crescita e consapevolezza che il protagonista ha intrapreso. L'analisi del testo si basa pertanto sugli studi riguardanti 'modalità' e 'punto di vista'. Si vuole inoltre evidenziare l'importanza che ricopre la lingua all'interno della struttura narrativa e nella creazione dei personaggi, nonché la loro interiorità, portando il lettore ad operare delle scelte critiche riguardo ai temi trattati.

Through the voice of an unknown Aboriginal narrator, Kim Scott's novel *True Country* introduces us into a story of loss, conflict and dispossesion, but at the same time, a story of love and reappropriation of Aboriginal identity. According to Knudsen (2004), in many novels written by Indigenous Australians the dominant atmosphere is imbued with feelings of frustration and anger in

representing the Aboriginal social reality along with the communities' alienation and loss of identity. Nevertheless, Scott's novel attempts to strike a balance between positive and negative aspects of the same phenomenon.

The story is about a teacher of Aboriginal descent who decides to find his roots and true identity in a remote mission village in Western Australia, called Karnama. Billy's story, the protagonist, intertwines with many other stories; his voice, which dominates at the beginning of the novel, is accompanied by a choir of different Aboriginal voices which take over the 'White' voice as the story develops. To use a Bakhtinian expression, we can define Scott's narrative technique as a 'polyphony' of 'unmerged voices and consciousnesses'. (Bakhtin, 1984:6)

This paper focuses on the crucial role played by the narrative technique of point of view on the ideological plane in Kim Scott's *True Country* and draws on theories of prose composition inspired by Fowler (1996). Furthermore, an analysis of modality at work will be discussed using Simpson's (1993) and Toolan's framework (2001). The notion of 'ideology' adopted throughout this article is intended as the way "in which what we say and think interacts with society. An ideology therefore derives from the taken-for-granted assumptions, beliefs and value systems which are shared collectively by social groups. And when an ideology is the ideology of a particular powerful social group, it is said to be *dominant*." (Simpson, 1993: 5). The value and belief system is reflected in the way the narrative is constructed and in the stylistic choices the author makes. Ideology can lie either at the grammatical level, in lexical elements and their semantic aspect or inside the fictional world of the characters. Thus, after a short introduction on how different modes of speech are combined together in order to convey idelogies, I will briefly explore some modality patterns used in the development of the novel alongside an analysis of style and language varieties, which is to be interpreted from a critical point of view of discourse.

The aim of this article is an analysis of the language and narrative modes adopted by the writer to show the development undergone by the protagonist of the novel, from an initial state of alienation and a sense of detachment from the Aboriginal community to the abandonment of all 'dominant-colonial' mentality and its stereotypes. By incorporating historical accounts from 'White' archives (1), Scott signals how Western history tried to imprison the 'Other', eradicating Aboriginality and giving a personalised and biased version of historical events. By letting Fatima and other members of the community speak, the author creates an effect of estrangement and, as a consequence, the reader is confused by a continuous shift of narrator, hence he/she is forced to go beyond one given truth. The relativism displayed throughout the text is achieved by using different language varieties. The author's standard Australian English is a way to put his work on the market and a guarantee to help the 'Western' reader feel more comfortable with the subject mater. In my view, all the instances where the text displays descriptive narrative modes, characterized by a diminished presence of modalizers, along with a sophisticated terminology which draws from Australian standard English and an omniscient third person narrator, contribute to creating a seemingly neutral authorial position. We can thus infer that the narrator is distancing himself from the story. This attitude entails an attempt to approach and confront canonical literature from an 'external' perspective. As a result, descriptions such as: "The old woman slowly turned and peered short-sightedly. The lenses of her spectacles were very thick and her eyes moved behind them like dark fish in a bowl. Her hair hung in thick grey ropes and stopped just short of her shoulders."(Scott 2008: 32) represent a way of normalizing something which is not familiar to a Westernised audience. Billy's search for a true identity becomes part of a major project; the ongoing process of reconciliation and recognition between the 'White' and 'Black' community (2).

According to the complex textual structure of the novel, a precise classification of the narratorial mode in Fowler's theory (1996) revised by Simpson (1993) is not immediately recognizable. The book alternates first person and third person narration: (free) direct discourse mixes with (free) indirect discourse, as in the following: "One night Sister rang the mission. We only had phones in Karnama a little time then. She was frightened, Murray he could hear it in her voice as soon as she spoke. *Murray, please can you come? There's drunken men outside the clinic. Shouting out and calling my name. They cannot even hardly stand up.*" (Scott, 2008: 141, my emphasis). This chapter begins with a third person narrator and continues with an unknown narrator's thoughts and words; the focalization comes from within an Indigenous person's mind. We can infer the narrator's background by dint of the use of the pronoun "We", which refers to the Indigenous community in Karnama. The writer usually lets Aboriginal people speak: "You gardiya hole. You don't trust us Aborigines? You don't wanna help black people? One day I make you sting, I lift you proper. [...]" (Scott 2008: 129) and the story blurs into a fusion of voices, while clearing the ground for Aboriginal storytelling.

The peculiarity of this novel lies in the absolute lack of a univocal dominant narrative pattern. There is a shift from category A to category B narrative, as proposed by Simposon's model. In Simpson's *Language, Ideology and Point of View* (1993), 'category A' narratives are referred to as: "those which are narrated in the first person by a partecipating character within the story". This category can be further subdivided into three patterns of modality: positive, negative and neutral. 'Category B' narratives have a third person narrator (heterodiegetic) and can be divided into: 'narratorial' and 'reflector mode'. (Simpson, 1993: 55). Where the story is told by Indigenous voices we have a predominance of A-ve sequences. (A-ve) narratives display a negative shading in that they are rich in epistemic and perception modalities (epistemic adverbs

and modal lexical verbs, epistemic modal auxiliaries), like in the following: "[...]Or *maybe* they want to steal our secrets [...] *Maybe* we will have to change. *Maybe* make more things sacred. [...] *Maybe* we make a little building like a church ourselves. You know, you can't act the fool with our law." (Scott, 2008: 166. My emphasis). As we can see, the epistemic modal adverb *maybe* always precedes the main proposition. The end result is that 'white' readers feel emotionally involved in the narrative fabric, closer to the narrator's feelings and start self-questioning about the moral and social system at stake. These transitional moments have a disorienting role, in that they are normally placed after descriptions of concrete and usually positive actions. On the contrary, by employing an objective and distancing third person narrator, the author takes an apparently external and objective stance towards the writing process. As Muecke points out (1984), the use of first, second and third person narrator places the addressee in different positions according to the type of text adopted by the author: third person narrators give an impartial and objective view of the overall story, whereas the first, and in this particular instance, the second person can appeal and let the reader into the events, as the story displays its true colours.

The introductory part begins with a remarkable presence of second person pronouns, which have the function to address the reader as well as the protagonist and direct them into a new world; into the self: "You listen to me. We're gunna make a true story. You might find it's here you belong. A place like this" (Scott, 2008:15). These words work as an initiation rite; they are an invitation to look for our true identity. Subsequently, the story shifts from a third person to a first person narrator; from a homodiegetic person (Genette, 1980) to a heterodiegetic one; internal and external focalization interchange. Various modes of speech are adopted as well, in order to embrace different viewpoints and insights. This narrative technique aims at reproducing the difficult process of reconcilement within the Aboriginal traditions and Australian society. It allows

the reader to be part of the psychic processes within the characters' minds, by enabling us to share or deny their value system. As a consequence we, as readers, are induced to feel a sense of displacement and confusion. As Toolan (2001) points out, the casual overlapping of various "ideological orientations" leads to emotional upheaval in the reader, who is "[...] torn between different views of certain events in particular and of the [...] world in general." (Toolan, 2001: 64).

In Scott's novel there is a strong prevalence of free direct discourse (both speech and thought), which gives the impression of a spontaneous and free dialogue between characters, a flow of thoughts, as if they were sitting in a circle telling Dreamtime stories. When the "I" speaks, both 'White' and 'Aboriginal', the narration becomes more vibrant and highly emotional. The reader is compelled to collaborate with the author in interpreting and understanding who is speaking. At a graphic level, the devices used by the author to separate the many voices which alternate throughout the narrative structure is a blank space between each paragraph and a change of narrative mode.

Scott adopts different perspectives and moulds the narrative rhythm according to the person who is speaking. Introducing the Bakhtinian notion of 'heteroglossia', we can say that the novel on examination exploits different world views and linguistic varieties of the English language in order to establish a dialogic relationship among writer/speaker and reader/listener. When the narrative gets more descriptive, the writer uses Australian standard English, whereas the non-standard idiomatic varieties are attributed to individual characters. The structure of the novel deconstructs the Western canon in that the initial abundance of descriptions makes room for sociolinguistic marked varieties of the standard. The omniscient narrator's language is absorbed into the Aboriginal and colloquial 'Englishes' of the Indigenous community.

Furthermore, the protagonist varies his register whenever it is required, depending on the social environment and the situation. Borrowing Halliday's (1994) terminology, we can say that when the 'I' speaks, grammar and vocabulary confirm the *mode* of discourse as spoken narrative of private experiences; the *field* being an account of personal events. As a consequence, the *tenor* of discourse results more colloquial and informal through expressions of direct address, evaluative adjective phrases, hesitations like: "I...I dunno if.." (Scott 2008: 183) and coarse language such as: "Shit, I wonder if you grabbed 'em young and tied their fuckin' feet up..", "Fuckin' legs." (Scott, 2008: 210). Varieties of English (standard Englishes, Aboriginal and colloquial Australian Englishes) are thus enhanced by individual idiolects (3). The nuances of these idiolects are represented in the text through a series of techiques so as to reproduce the most common features of spoken discourse, for instance: the use of lexical elements typical of Australian colloquial English (eg.: "reckon" instead of "think", "bloke", "mate"), the omission of verbal elements (eg.:"good car this"), repetitions (eg.: "again again again"), onomatopoeic words (eg.: "Aiee!"), the use of figures of speech, such as aphaeresis (eg.: "im" instead of 'him'; "get 'em" for 'get them'), apocope (eg.: "fella"), assimilation of letters and sounds from two words into one (eg.: "dunno", "wanna", "gunna").

What we have seen so far is the way language reflects major social factors by giving voice and reshaping them into the fictional fabric. The great fascination attached to stories is to be found in their potential to pass on complex webs of symbols and hidden meanings; similarly, grammatical structures, along with lexical choices: "[...] are always made against the background of their history of use in the community, they carry the `freight' of their associations with them, and a text must often struggle to appropriate another's word to make it its own" (Lemke, 1992: 85).

This article only skims the surface of the complex topic of character's construction through language and point of view. Yet, by reflecting major social events in the mechanisms which rule local stories, the protagonist's life takes part in a process of transformation and regeneration, thus seeking his true identity. As Bhabha states, reporting Fanon's words: "The knowledge of the people depends on the discovery […] '*of a much more fundamental substance which itself is continually being renewed*'" (Bhabha 1994: 218). Thus, the Aboriginal voice takes over again at the end of the novel, by framing a circular narration which leads the reader into an undiscovered personal dimension: "Now you know. True country. Because just living, just living is going downward lost drifting nowhere, no matter if you be skitter-scatter dancing anykind like mad. We (4) gotta be moving, remembering, singing our place little bit new, little bit special, all the time. We are seriuos. We are Grinning. Welcome to you." (Scott, 2008: 299)

**NOTES:**

1. By 'white archives' I refer to a specific passage in the book where the author mentions the "mission journals" (Scott 2008:41) written by the first missionaries about the community of Karnama.

2. The use of labels based on racial parameters, such as 'black' and 'white' is intended in a critical way, so as to stress the tendency to create binary systems of opposites within Western societies. Such a dichotomy is to be ascribed to many studies on Indigenous and, more extensively, Australian literature (see Muecke 1984, Shoemaker 1989).

3. The term *idiolect* has been introduced by Bloch (1948) to represent one person's speech about a single subject for a certain period of time and refers to any variety of language who possesses the intrinsic properties of single individuals. According to him an 'Idiolect' is: "The totality of the possible utterances of one

speaker at one time in using a language to interact with one other speaker [...]". (Bloch 1948:7)

4. He talks on behalf of the Aboriginal community. The inclusive 'We' is meant to be an indicator of openess of the Indigenous people towards Western culture; an attempt to establish a partnership. The opposition between the initial 'You' and the final 'We' is a clear sign of a linguistic and narrative development, in that it goes beyond the boundaries imposed by ethnic dissimilarities .

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