

## PERCEPTION OF COHERENCE IN CONTEMPORARY SHORT FICTION

Oxana CREANGA

Moldova State University

Coherence is one of the basic structural and pragmatic principles of textual organization. Contemporary literary narratives display a range of strategies and narrative techniques that defy the canons of coherence and preclude the comprehension of the text. Drawing on an interdisciplinary approach that combines text linguistics, cognitive and narrative concerns, the study reviews the principles of text coherence, i.e. the standards of time, intention, goal, causality, thematic unity and continuity, and focuses on the levels, subtypes and degrees of coherence in the flash story "Haircut" by Lydia Copeland. It explores the impact of narrative aspects and categories, such as achrony, fragmentariness, types of discourses, and narrative situation, on the reader's mental contribution in perceiving local and global coherence in the course of interpreting the narrative. Finally, it argues that establishing coherence in flash texts relies on the receiver's cooperativeness and narrative implicature, his/her background knowledge and ability to detect ellipsis, retrieve contextually relevant information, and draw inferences.

**Keywords:** coherence, standards of textuality, continuity of topic, unity, narrativization, text comprehension.

## PERCEPEREA COERENȚEI ÎN PROZA SCURTĂ CONTEMPORANĂ

Coerența reprezintă unul dintre principiile structurale și pragmatice de bază în organizarea textuală. Proza literară contemporană conține un șir de strategii și tehnici narative ce sfidează normele coerenței și generează impedimente în comprehensiunea textului. Având la bază o abordare interdisciplinară ce îmbină teorii din lingvistica textului, naratologie și lingvistica cognitivă, studiul conține reconsiderarea mijloacelor de asigurare a coerenței, precum criteriul temporalității, intenție, scop, cauzalitate, unitate și continuitate tematică, și se axează pe nivelurile, tipurile și gradul de coerență în proza contemporană scurtă, *id est* povestirea „Haircut” de Lydia Copeland. În articol este analizat impactul aspectelor și al categoriilor narative, cum ar fi acronia, fragmentarea, tipurile de discursuri și situațiile narative, asupra capacității cititorului de a identifica/urmări coerența locală și globală în procesul interpretării textuale. Cercetarea demonstrează că stabilirea coerenței în proza scurtă contemporană este condiționată de astfel de factori, precum: cooperarea receptorului, implicarea narativă, cunoștințele de bază ale receptorului și capacitatea sa de a identifica elipsa diegetică, de a recupera informația contextual relevantă și de a face inferenți.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** coerență, standarde ale textualității, continuitate tematică, unitate, narativizare, comprehensiunea textului.

In narratology, coherence has been treated as a complex phenomenon "because it occurs along so many literary axes" [8, p.142]. Peter J. Rabinowitz, in *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation*, regards coherence as "unity", "basic pattern" or "overarching meaning" [8, p.141], "as a quality of the vision of the poet or of the world he or she describes" [8, p.142]. In a more restricted way, the term is used by Seymour Chatman to refer to consistency of reference [2, p.142]. As a text linguistic notion, coherence denotes the properties in the structure and design of a text that determine readers to deem the identified textual parts as all contributing to a whole and making sense, not just being a jumble of sentences [9]. Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang U. Dressler include coherence in the list of seven standards of textuality and define it as a "continuity of senses", "the mutual access and relevance within a configuration of concepts and relations" [1]. The configuration underlying a text is the textual world, which may or may not correspond with the conventional version of the "real world". Interpreting textual worlds requires the meaning of expressions in the surface text and *common sense knowledge* based on the participants' expectations and experience regarding the represented events and situations [1].

Neither text linguistic factors in textual coherence, i.e. rules of anaphora, norms of paragraphing and paragraph structure, sequencing of segments and the way the relations between them are signaled, nor common sense knowledge applied in contexts are sufficient guides in tracking coherence, as there are narratives that go beyond common sense and exhibit complex textual patternings. Narratologists acknowledge the status of coherence as both a textual property and an activity on the part of the reader [8; 9]. Therefore coherence is a pragmatically-determined quality, requiring close attention to the specific sense made of the text in the cultural context. As M. Toolan posits, "Judgments of coherence are very much based on the addressees' evaluation of what is relevant and informative in the discursal circumstances of the individual text under analysis" [9]. He

states that coherence is implicitly considered as an important feature of narrative because all formalists and structuralist models of story and discourse that proffer any kind of morphology or grammar of narratives are based on elements judged as essential to text coherence, such as temporal, causal, thematic coherence, topic-maintenance and topic-furtherance backed up by repetition [9]. The basis of coherence was introduced in Aristotle's *Poetics*, emphasis being laid on unity of plot with a beginning, a middle, and an end, unity of incident, the developing structure by means of complications followed by a denouement. Narratologists admit that stories that do not come up to readers' expectations about time, goal, causality, ending may fail to arouse their interest and be deemed as incomplete or incoherent. But difficulties in text understanding generated by achrony, or unwarranted shifts in setting or character, scarce denomination systems do not amount to incoherence, as norms concerning narrative coherence are dependent on the society, culture, as well as period and genre [9]. The addressee's competence, their cultural background is essential in tracking narrative coherence. Readers who are knowledgeable about the ensemble of codes and narrative techniques used in the text by the author are able to complete the blanks or solve the indeterminacies, thus restoring the unity of the text.

There are degrees of coherence, varying from the minimal to the maximal [9]. In the case of narratives, there are generic norms that guide coherence, such as the presence of story or plot, the development of an inter-related event sequence, the focus on one or a few characters undergoing change, and the presence of a situation of stability developing a disequilibrium, following which a renewed but altered equilibrium emerges (closure). The elliptical, the implied, the unsaid but inferable are complications that defy coherence in narratives [9]. Different concepts have been proffered in order to account for readers' capacity to track global coherence even in texts that display very low degrees of explicit coherence. Relevant in this respect is the process of "naturalization" introduced by Jonathan Culler or the conception of "narrativization" developed by Monika Fludernik. The concept of "naturalization" explains readers' interpretative strategies when confronting textual or semantic inconsistencies resorting to the familiarization of the strange [4, p.134-160]. Based on Culler's process of naturalization, Monika Fludernik uses "narrativization" to describe a reading strategy by resorting to one specific macro-frame, namely that of *narrativity* [7, p.25]. When offered potentially unreadable narratives, texts that are completely incoherent, readers attempt to recuperate inconsistencies in terms of actions and event structures at the most minimal level, i.e. they construct these texts in terms of their alignment with experiential (real-life) cognitive parameters [7, p.235]. According to Fludernik, these incoherences cease to be worrisome when they are read as series of events or when they are interpreted as distorted versions of a reflecting or telling agency or consciousness (narrator or focalizer) [7, p.202].

The distinction between coherent texts that barely require the readers' contribution to sense-making and samples of contemporary fictional narration that pose challenges to meaning-constructing practices reflect the dichotomy of *readerly texts versus writerly texts* introduced by Roland Barthes [*apud* 8, p.145] or *closed versus open texts* offered by Umberto Eco [5]. *Readerly* or *closed texts* are based on values which a classical reader expects in a text, i.e. linearity of the narrative, transparency of meaning, and continuity of plot. Such texts do not contain irrelevant details or complex symbols, their endings completely comply with the expectations readers have at their beginnings. These texts require no special rules of coherence or any special effort on the part of the reader to make sense of them [8, p.145]. The *writerly texts* allow readers to create a plurality of meanings which go beyond the logical construction of the text. This type of texts challenges the literary norms and conventions. As Peter J. Rabinowitz states, these are "works that leave us baffled and confused until we apply the proper procedures to them—works that are just pieces of wood and rope until we find the proper assembly techniques and apply the proper effort" [8, p.146]. He examines three sets of texts which correspond to three ways in which they can appear to be incoherent and, consequently, solicit some activities, rules of coherence that guide readers' interpretations of texts as completed wholes: 1) insufficient texts that appear incoherent because of "gaps in their fabric" become coherent by filling in the blanks following *the rules inertia* and *of realism*; 2) overabundant texts that can have a surplus of information has to be managed through showing their relevance to general patterns; and 3) disparate texts that have to be related through naming, bundling, or thematizing [8, p.148-152].

Among other challenges to coherence, Michael Toolan includes free indirect discourse, which comprises two deictic centers ascribed to two different narrative entities – character and narrator, bearers of distinct points of view, metaphor where readers fail to detect it, irony, metalepsis, unreliability, which leads to ambiguity [9]. At the opposite pole of coherence continuum lie "texts" comprising randomly connected sentences, with

equally random sequencing of unrelated words within those sentences which defy any ability of the reader to construct the meaning behind the text. Plot twists which involve discontinuity of character, time, place, and event-sequencing caused by a sudden tragedy or comedy represent another kind of coherence-challenge to narratives [9].

Flash fiction, as a particular sub-genre of prose fiction characterized by extreme brevity, its length, ranging from 100 words up to 1,000 or even 1,500 words and covering a variety of styles, traditions and genres can also be judged as rather incoherent. Printed in literary journals, magazines, anthologies, internet publications, flashes are a mode of writing which seems mainly well-suited to our current fast-paced lives. Flash fiction is deemed as highly experimental writing due to the variety of literary trends that it embraces and the innovative narrative techniques. From the point of view of narrative modes and plot architectonics employed, flash stories can be written using only one or two sentences, others comprise dialogue only, or the use of second-person narratives. The even progression of plot sequencing can often be disturbed by unpredictable twists throughout the story, or at the end of it, aspects that make it elusive, ambiguous, and quite often paradoxical. Relying considerably on implication, thus amounting to the interpretive challenges of the reader, the writings under consideration are widely felt to exhibit a low degree of explicit coherence.

A sample of short fiction that encompasses the great number of features stated above is the story "Haircut" by Lydia Copeland appeared in issue 6 of NOO Journal [3, p.20]. The unusual plot design, the narrative situation and deviations from generic norms of textual composition challenge the canons of text coherence and therefore require of readers great sense-making skills in order to comprehend the text.

The first and foremost difficulty that the reader faces is the general uncertainty as to what happens in the story. It displays an entanglement of narrative planes: the main line of the narrative, presented as simultaneous narration, shows the scene of a woman cutting someone's hair as it unfolds ("SHE IS CUTTING HIS HAIR"), both characters being referred to by means of referentless pronouns *she*, *he*, *his*, whereas the retrospective line of the narrative presents implicitly the tragic accident that took away her brother's life. The model reader can identify enough evidence to imagine a narrativity frame of the text and, thus, to *naturalize* (Culler's term) it as an adequate and tellable narrative. The visual, kinesthetic and olfactory images experienced by the narrator trigger her memories, emotions of regret, longing:

**SHE IS CUTTING HIS HAIR.** *The wind is in her curls. She rises and falls like a sleeping animal. He has removed his shirt. There is a towel around his neck, the smell of spice and banana, the scent of vacations. You are reminded of the time in the beach house in Florida when you told your brother there was no Santa Claus and no Easter Bunny and no tooth fairy. These three blows in one sentence. The two of you were sharing a bed, supposed long asleep. Your brother ran crying into the living room. They asked, how could you? [...] You see how his mustache needs trimming, how her fingers are fast with the shears. You see these things from above, on the roof outside your bedroom [3, p.20].*

The author resorts to a rarely employed type of narrative situation – second-person narrative or you-narrative, which, according to Monika Fludernik, "allows an easy transition into empathy with the protagonist" [7, p.173]. Being a special form of homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narratives, you-narratives appear rather complex to readers due to the identity of the referent denoted by the second person pronoun. The occurrence of "you" pronoun prompts the deceptive identification with an intradiegetic narratee, i.e. character to whom another character tells the story. In fact, the sample under scrutiny is written from the subjective perspective of the character referred to by "you". Therefore, functionally "you" refers to the narrator's *experiencing Self* present at the intradiegetic level. The existential position of the narrator is ambiguous too. The extensive use of retrospection and abundant personal details gradually revealed confirm the initial hypothesis that the "you" refers to the narrator who is also a character in the story:

*You want to slowly lift like a transparent body, like an outline of yourself, like you imagine your brother had lifted from his head and out of his bedroom and into the attic. [...] You imagine your brother must have lingered there awhile and then floated out of the house, and into the nimbus of space. [3, p.20].*

Still the gender identity of the narrator is indeterminate until the final part of the story when the syntagm "a pixie haircut" occurs: "She will shape his hairline with her leg razor, just as she used to shape yours when you had a pixie haircut [...]". Based on common sense knowledge, the reader assumes that "you" stands for a woman narrator, since the word combination designates a short hairstyle worn by women.

Another challenge that the reader encounters in building coherence and comprehending the text is the type of incipit. It is an *etic opening*, i.e. *in medias res* beginning, typical of reflector-mode narratives, treating

characters and objects from the fictional world as given, known and therefore in no need of being introduced [6, p.45]. The linguistic markers of the type of incipit under consideration are the use of pronouns without antecedents (*referentless pronouns*) as well as noun phrases with definite articles (*familiarizing articles*) before any people or objects have been properly introduced by indefinite ones. Without being provided any exposition, the reader is immediately cast into the middle of the action and forced to make sense of what had happened previously or to whom the narrator might be referring when repetitively using throughout the text the pronouns "he" and "she".

The incompleteness of the plot, a basic feature that leads to incoherence, is enhanced by the deficiency of other elements of the story, such as inciting moment, complications, or denouement. Moreover, the central crisis is rather difficult to be identified. The final sentence of the text "*Everything is light as a thread*" might be interpreted as an epiphanic ending. Applying the rules of co-reference, "everything" can denote the "*nests of hair are swept from the porch*", "*the shapes of needles in the air*" mentioned in the previous sentences or the futility of life, the fragility of transitory human condition, "*a moment of vision*" from the reminiscences of the narrator's childhood tragedy presented earlier in the text: "*You imagine your brother must have lingered there awhile and then floated out of the house, and into the nimbus of space.*" [3]

Local coherence is prejudiced by a number of other narrative features: the alternation of concurrent and retrospective narration, showing and telling narrative modes, and free indirect discourse. The shift from the primary story line of the narrative to external flashbacks is not always explicitly marked in "Haircut", thus affecting the logical sequencing of events. The text opens with the present line and moves to retrospection, then the main line is resorted followed by a subsequent analepsis. The pattern is repeated throughout the text. The only indices that mark the transition are the scarce verbs of mental activity "*you are reminded*", temporal deictics "*that day*", "*last week*" and tense shifts from present simple or present continuous employed in the scenic presentation "*She is cutting his hair. The wind is in her curls. She rises and falls like a sleeping animal.[...] There is a towel around his neck [...]*" [3] to past simple and past perfect that mark the events occurring before the beginning of the primary story line:

*"You are reminded of the time in the beach house in Florida when you told your brother there was no Santa Claus and no Easter Bunny and no tooth fairy."* [3]

or

*"You want to slowly lift like a transparent body, like an outline of yourself, like you imagine your brother had lifted from his head and out of his bedroom and into the attic. [...] That day he bled through the carpet and into the basement. Everyone had gone to the carnival to eat ice cream. He had come home to an empty house."* [3]

The adjustment of grammatical tenses is not respected in every instance of deictic shift. A high degree of temporal incongruity occurs in the excerpt:

*"You imagine your brother must have lingered there awhile and then floated out of the house, and into the nimbus of space. That day he bled through the carpet and into the basement. Everyone had gone to the carnival to eat ice cream. He had come home to an empty house. You can hear the neighbor's fireworks, can see a trail of smoke, but there is no silver light ferning across the sky, no bloom of gun powder. It is not quite afternoon. She peels the burnt skin from his shoulders."* [3]

The fragment displays a concatenation of temporal planes that are not distinctly signaled. The first four sentences represent the retrospective domain of the narrator-focalizer marked by the past perfect tense ("*Everyone had gone to the carnival*", "*He had come home to an empty house*" etc.), while the fifth sentence ("*You can hear the neighbor's fireworks, can see a trail of smoke, but there is no silver light ferning across the sky, no bloom of gun powder.*") is rather ambiguous from the point of view of temporal axis it denotes. It evokes the perceptual subjectivity of the same focalizer rendered in present tense, a peculiarity that impedes the reader from ascribing the sequence to the retrospective level of the narrative. Still it represents the same retrospective domain of the first four sentences mentioned above. The occurrence of related vocabulary items "*carnival*", "*neighbor's fireworks*", "*a trail of smoke*" insure thematic coherence and, therefore, create a premise for attributing the sentences in which these lexical units occur to the same temporal dimension of the text. The last two sentences of the quoted excerpt restore the primary line of the narrative.

Having considered the issue of coherence in a sample of contemporary short fiction, it can be stated that identifying the given standard of textuality in "Haircut" by Lydia Copeland is a challenging task for readers. The complexity in text comprehension and its interpretation stems from multiple inconsistencies at both micro

and macro levels of textual organization: local coherence is precluded by defying norms of paragraphing and paragraph structure, co-reference, tense sequencing and thematic cohesion, while global coherence is affected by plot incompleteness, temporal discontinuities and innovative narrative techniques concerning the narrative situation and type of focalization. Hence the category of coherence in fictional narratives encompasses a number of areas of linguistic and narratological studies: discourse analysis, reception theory, tellability, narrativity and cognitive linguistics.

#### **Bibliography:**

1. BEAUGRANDE, R de, DRESSLER, W. *Introduction to Text Linguistics*. Longman, 1981, 2002 [Accessed: 5.01.2015] Available: [http://www.beaugrande.com/introduction\\_to\\_text\\_linguistics.htm](http://www.beaugrande.com/introduction_to_text_linguistics.htm).
2. CHATMAN, S. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978. 277 p. ISBN 0-8914-1131-9
3. COPELAND, L. Haircut. In: *NOO Journal*, issue 6, 2007, p.20. [Accessed: 17.10.2014] Available: [http://noojournal.com/six/noo\\_six.pdf](http://noojournal.com/six/noo_six.pdf)
4. CULLER, J. *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature*. London: Routledge, 2002. 348 p. ISBN 0-415-28989-0
5. ECO, U. *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*. Indiana University Press, 1984. 273 p. ISBN 0-253-20318-X
6. FLUDERNIK, M. *An Introduction to Narratology*. New York: Routledge, 2009. 190 p. ISBN 10: 0-415-45029-2
7. FLUDERNIK, M. *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*. London: Routledge, 1996. 349 p. ISBN 0-415-12482-4
8. RABINOWITZ, P.J. *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987. 249 p. ISBN 0814207596
9. TOOLAN, M. Coherence. In: Hühn, Peter et al. (eds.): *The Living Handbook of Narratology*. Hamburg: Hamburg University Press. [Accessed: 12.01.2015] Available: <http://wikis.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Coherence>

*Prezentat la 01.10.2015*