

THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING IN YASUNARI KAWABATA'S "SNOW COUNTRY"

Magdalena Ciubăncan*

magdalena.ciubancan@ucdc.ro

Abstract: *The literary text is the space where human language reaches the peak of its functionality, where language as logos semantikos fully manifests its creative possibilities. Our paper is an attempt to analyse the way in which linguistic meaning is constructed in Kawabata's famous novel Yukiguni (Snow Country). The meaning of a text and especially the meaning of a literary text represents much more than the sum of the meanings of its composing elements. We search for relations that go deeper than the mere syntactic combinations of words and phrases. We look at Kawabata's text trying to identify the active networks that play a part in constructing the meaning of the novel. We refer to the original text and to its translations into Romanian and English in order to see which of the networks become active and how the activation of one or another of the networks may influence the final result of the interpretative process.*

Keywords: *text, meaning, network, Snow Country*

What makes a text a text? The answer to this question has been a challenge for a great number of linguists, semanticists or semioticians who have tried to uncover the deep structure the entity called "text". In this paper we look on the reticular character of textual meaning by applying it to the opening lines of the novel "Snow Country" written by Yasunari Kawabata.

The etymology of the word "text" places its roots in the Latin *textus* (a tissue), which is in turn derived from *texere*, meaning "to weave". A text is therefore a weaving in which every thread has its own story to tell. The image of the text as a weaving, a web or, in words more connected to our present-day life, a network is very helpful for our attempt of explaining the way in which textual meaning is constructed, as it provides a very suggestive visual representation of the intricate relations that define the nature of a text. The interplay between words, structures, nuances, images, registers and so many other elements is what makes a text meaningful. In her book "Textul aisberg"¹, the Romanian linguist Carmen Vlad offers a very expressive representation of the text as an iceberg. She notes that the visible/audible part of any kind of text – clauses and sentences – represents only the top of a much bigger iceberg which lays hidden under a frail surface, waiting to be discovered. We base our analysis on the theoretical background provided by C.

* Assistant Lecturer, Ph.D., - "Dimitrie Cantemir" Christian University, Bucharest.

¹ „The Iceberg Text” – translation ours.

Vlad (Vlad, 2003), more specifically on the idea that the meaning of a text has a reticular nature, where a multitude of networks are actualized through the various links and connections in which verbal and/or non-verbal signs having different functions are simultaneously involved. It is the articulation of these networks that leads to the production of textual meaning.

Before going into an applicative analysis of Kawabata's literary production, we will first briefly present Vlad's theory related to the networks that interact during the process of meaning construction. She talks about the existence of sixteen such networks, but the list is not necessarily exhaustive.

The first network that Vlad discusses is the most visible and obvious one when a person encounters a text: **the phonemic/graphemic network**². If we have a written text, we encounter the graphemic network, while in the case of an oral text we talk about the phonemic network. At this level the aspects that are to be analysed refer to the 'material' side of the signs – letters or sounds. It is here that we tackle with alliteration, assonance, consonance, puns on words, different fonts etc. – all of these being instances of an iconic representation of the textual content.

The **intonational/melodic network** brings together all the aspects that have to do with the prosodic configuration of the text: pauses, intonational curves, rhythm, accent, focus etc. – in oral texts, and the use of punctuation, the layout, text formatting (bold, italic, underline) etc. - in written texts. The use of all of these elements influence the interpretation, hence the various meanings that can be attributed to the same linear sequence of sounds or letters.

The **intersystemic network** refers to the relations between language, as it is used in texts, and other signifying systems. For example, the meaning of an oral text is a mixture of linguistic signs – including aspects such as suprasegmental phonemes (stress, intonation, rhythm) - that enter in a relation with a multitude of non-verbal signs (body language, dress elements etc.). In a written text, the lack of the non-verbal signs that have so much impact in oral communication is compensated by the use of colours, images, pictures, diagrams, graphs etc.

The **grammatical network** refers to the configuration of the text from two complementary perspectives: a logical perspective and a syntactic perspective. It is here that we analyse syntactic relations within and between clauses and sentences, as well as strategies that support the cohesion of utterances in a text. There are two distinct levels where such relations need to be discussed: the sentence level, where we talk about syntactic relations, and the trans-sentence level, where we talk about cohesion and cohesion strategies (textual connectors, pro-forms, recurrence, and ellipsis).

While the grammatical network touches mainly on syntactic relations, the **actantial network** constitutes the semantic counterpart of the grammatical one. Closely linked to Fillmore's case semantics (Fillmore 1968), the actantial network refers to the thematic roles of the constituent elements of the utterance: Causer, Agent, Instrument, Patient, Source, Beneficiary etc.

² The translation of the names of the networks belongs to us.

The **referential network** derives from the relations between language signs and objects in the outside world or in possible worlds. The influence on the process of meaning production is reflected in the fact that the reader/interlocutor must refer to a certain entity in order for communication to be successful (Kleiber, 1990: 242). This particular entity can belong to the real world or to an imaginary, fictitious world, in which case we talk about an extra-linguistic referential act. The means to carry out this referential act are the use of deixis and the use of proper names. On the other hand, if the entity referred to is inside the text, we talk about an intratextual referential act, carried out by resorting to anaphoric or cataphoric referential identification. "The interpretation of any text from this perspective requires thus the identification of both the extra-textual referential network, composed of relations between objects that are evoked through linguistic forms, and the intra-textual referential network, consisting of the chains of co-referential linguistic terms" (Vlad, 2003: 132).

The **thematic network** refers to the way in which the text is organized from the point of view of the relation between old information (theme/topic) and new information (rheme/comment). The topic and the comment of one sentence, taken together, can constitute the topic or the comment of a whole text (Coseriu, 1997). The topic-comment chain thus formed ensures the continuity of textual meaning.

The **spatio-temporal network** includes both linguistic signs that refer to the real time and space - that is the time and the space of the real or of a possible extra-textual world to which reference is made in the text - as well as the grammatical tenses and the complex system that their usage creates.

Closely related to the spatio-temporal network, the **event-episode network** refers to "the chronologically-ordered succession of narrative utterances (or events) in a text" (Vlad, 2003: 150). In order for an event-episode network to exist, it is necessary that at least two narrative utterances that are chronologically distinct should exist.

The **figurative network** is formed of the figures of speech present in a text. Although at first sight one might say that this network is characteristic to a literary text, this is not actually the case. Advertising or political texts are just two examples of discourses that make very efficient use of the elements of the figurative network - comparisons, metaphors, personification etc.

The **sememic network** brings into light the semantic traits (semes) that are found in the semantic structure of words and refers to the repeated use of these traits throughout a text. The reader/listener must be able to identify such marks and thus create a meaningful connection at the level of the content of the text. Vlad uses A.J. Greimas's term of *isotopy* (Greimas, 1966), which is the repetition of a basic meaning trait in a text, allowing for a uniform reading of that particular text.

The **intertextual, paratextual and metatextual network** has some characteristics in common with the referential network, in that both networks contain referring elements. The difference lies in the nature of the referred objects. While in the case of the referential network the objects were things or persons, when we talk about the intertextual, paratextual and metatextual network, we must consider the textual nature of the referred object. The

identification of intertextual references in particular is highly dependent on the reader's/listener's knowledge about what Coseriu calls "the universe of discourse"³ (Coseriu, 1956/1967). The universe of discourse is defined as the universal systems of significations in rapport to which the validity and the sense of a specific discourse can be circumscribed. Among the various universes of discourse, Coseriu lists literature, mythology, science, mathematics and the empirical universe.

The **modal network** refers to the speaker's attitude towards the semantic representations or the objects that they refer to. Linguistically, the modal network is mainly reflected in the verbal category of the mood, but it can also be represented lexically, by means of words that express attitudes, such as *to believe, to wish, must* etc.

Other networks that the reader/listener may resort to in the process of interpretation of a text are the illocutionary network, the argumentative network and the communicative network. The **communicative network** refers to the vocalic or polyphonic configuration of the text, often manifested in conversations or face-to-face dialogues. The **argumentative network** refers to the intention of the speaker to influence the interlocutor's opinions, so that the latter would in the end accept the former's beliefs. Finally, the **illocutionary network** starts from Austin's speech act theory⁴ (Austin, 1962).

The above-described networks rarely or never exist alone, but form combinations out of which the meaning of a text emerges. Various types of texts require the actualization of certain networks. For example, an advertisement would make use especially of the argumentative, illocutionary or the figurative networks, but that does not mean that elements belonging to the other networks are ignored. Literary texts are however those where human language is used at the highest levels of its potential and where one can easily recognize the relations that occur between many of the networks presented so far. In the following section of our paper, we will analyse in detail the opening lines of Yasunari Kawabata's "Snow Country", since we consider that they are a very representative starting point in the interpretation of the novel. We use the original text, but also its translations into English and Romanian⁵.

JAPANESE

国境の長いトンネルを抜けると雪国であった。夜の底が白くなった。信号所に汽車が止まった。

ENGLISH

The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country. The earth lay white under the night sky. The train pulled up at a signal stop.

ROMANIAN

Din tunelul lung de hotar trenul intră în țara zăpezilor. Întunericul albi până-n străfunduri. Opriră la halta de semnalizare.

³ Translation ours.

⁴ Austin's speech acts theory claims that aside from the utterances that simply describe states of things and can, therefore, be labeled as true or false, there are utterances that cannot be judged as true or false because they do not describe states but refer to the carrying out of some actions.

⁵ For the English translation, we chose the famous 1956 version of Edward Seidensticker, while for the Romanian version we used Stanca Cionca's 2007 version.

向側の座席から娘が立って来て、島村の前のガラス窓を落とした。雪の冷気が流れこんだ。娘は窓いっぱいになり出して、遠くへ叫ぶように、
「駅長さん、駅長さん。」

A girl who had been sitting on the other side of the car came over and opened the window in front of Shimamura. The snowy cold poured in. Leaning far out the window, the girl called to the station master as though he were a great distance away.

Fata care stătuse pe bancheta din fața lui Shimamura se ridică să deschidă geamul de lângă el. Un suflu de aer înzăpezit se prelinse înăuntru. Aplecată adânc pe fereastră, fata îl strigă pe șeful de haltă, cum strigi pe cineva de tare departe.

明かりをさげてゆっくり雪を踏んで来た男は、襟巻きで鼻の上まで包み、耳に帽子の毛皮を垂れていた。

The station master walked slowly over the snow, a lantern in his hand. His face was buried to the nose in a muffler, and the flaps of his cap were turned down over his ears.

Cel chemat, un omuleț îmbrobodit până deasupra nasului într-un fular gros, cu căciula de blană trasă zdravăn peste urechi, păși mărunț prin zăpadă către ei, cu un lămpaș aprins în mână.

もうそんな寒さかと島村は外を眺めると、鉄道の官舎らしいバラックが山裾に寒寒と散らばっているだけで、雪の色はそこまで行かぬうちに闇に呑まれていた。
(Yukiguni, Iwanami Edition, p.7)

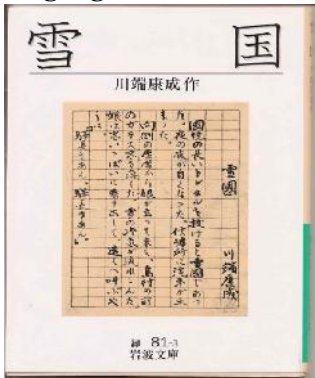
It's that cold, is it, thought Shimamura. Low, barrack-like buildings that might have been railway dormitories were scattered here and there up the frozen slope of the mountain. The white of the snow fell away into the darkness some distance before it reached them. (Snow Country, translation by E. Seidensticker, p. 11)

Ce frig trebuie să fie, gândi Shimamura privind la niște barăci, desigur ale administrației haltei, care păreau zgribulite, presărate ici și colo sub poalele muntelui. Albeața zăpezii, înghițită de întuneric, nu ajungea până la ele. (Țara zăpezilor, translation by S. Cionca, p.5)

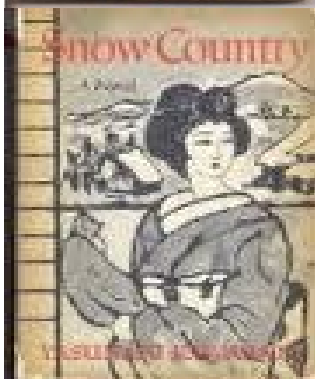
Kawabata does not make overt use of elements belonging to the graphemic network in “Snow Country”. He does not use the characteristics of the letters in order to obtain special effects in his manuscript. However, there is an aspect that can be taken into account when talking about creating meaning from graphic signs: the system of writing. The original version of the novel is written in Japanese. While for a Japanese person the sight of the text in its original language probably has no major implications over his/her interpretation, for a European, for example, a mere look at the original text – even without being able to read it or understand it - may already give birth to certain ideas related to the world of the text: the text is written in an Asian language, so the action might involve an Asian setting and Asian characters, it may be a text about exotic, remote places and people and so on. The very first ‘physical’ contact with the text can already initiate the process of meaning production. Furthermore, although the intonational/melodic network is also not overtly realized, since the text is not

meant for being read aloud, the inner voice that each reader hears when reading a text may influence the interpretation of the fragment. Thus, if we take the English version as an example, one person might stress the word *train* while reading the sentence, while another person might stress the words *long tunnel* and in this way shift the attention from a dynamic image of a train in motion to a static image of a never ending tunnel.

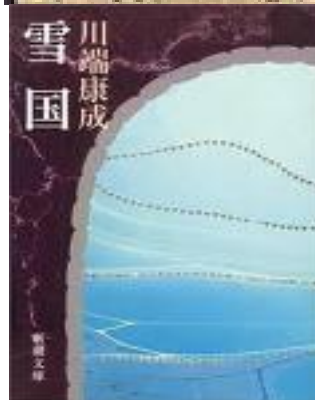
Further nuances may also come from the intersystemic network. Even before seeing the first word of the text, the reader already starts the interpretation of the meaning of the novel by looking at the cover of the book. Let us consider some of the images that appear on various editions of “Snow Country”, regardless of the language:



The use of a photo of the original manuscript lets the reader interact directly with the feelings and the emotions of the writer, as they are transmitted through his handwriting. Kawabata’s manuscript is not a ‘tormented’ one, with a lot of corrections or annotations. The story flows gently and the reader can see and feel that, which might give him/her a certain direction of interpretation.



In the second example, the image on the cover is much more explicit, guiding the reader in a rather controlled direction of interpretation. The reader is given the major elements of the story – the setting, the season and even the suggestion that the story will involve a Japanese woman, probably a geisha. The interpretative process is less free than in the first case.



The last example also involves an image, but in this case it is less explicit than the second one. The use of the arch may suggest a window through which the reader is invited to take a glimpse into Snow Country – in its turn beautifully represented by the use of wintery colours and contours of forms waiting to be filled with meanings. The motif of the window is a recurrent one throughout the novel, so one can easily see how elements of the bigger meaning of the novel are gently suggested by resorting to a signification system different from language, namely images.

Elements of the grammatical network are quite visible in the fragment that we are analyzing, especially those which refer to relations between sentences and logical utterances, namely the cohesive devices. In the quoted fragments we can easily identify cohesive strategies, among which recurrence is the most visible one. In all the three versions, the syntactic-semantic units are linked by the repetition of some words: *girl* (E)/*fata* (R)/*娘* (J) or the proper name *Shimamura*. However, probably the most important cohesive chain is formed by the recurrence of the word *snow/zăpadă* (with the version *înzăpezit*)/*雪*, which is found first in the title of the novel, repeated four times in the quoted fragments and obsessively used throughout the whole novel. The image of the snow thus becomes the red thread that holds the whole text together.

The actualization of the actantial network in the three languages offers interesting elements to be discussed. If we compare the first sentence of the three versions, we immediately notice that while in the translations there is an overtly expressed agent – *the train/trenul* – in the original Japanese version there is no linguistic expression of such a thematic role. The Japanese sentence reads “on passing through the long tunnel at the border, (it) was snow country”. The image constructed in this way is completely different: while in English or in Romanian the narrator becomes a spectator, watching everything from an outside, external perspective, in Japanese the narrator and the protagonist are merged in one. Y. Ikegami (Ikegami, 2004) claims that this phenomenon is representative for the Japanese language, where the principle of the egocentric construal of the perspective is a typological one, reflected in various other areas of the Japanese language (direction verbs, give/receive verbs, predicates referring to private psychological states or processes etc.). The different actualization of the actantial network in the three languages may lead to different interpretative directions, hence different meanings.

Regarding the referential network, although at first sight things may appear different in Japanese as compared to the translations, in reality they are the same. “Snow Country” is a literary, fictional text, so one would expect that the type of reference to be found here is the intra-textual reference. Indeed, examples of intra-textual reference are numerous, mainly manifested in co-referential chains. For example, one such co-referential chain opens with the word *girl/fată/娘*. It will be continued throughout the novel by means of lexical repetition of this word, but also by using other lexical items to refer to the same entity (the proper name *Yoko* is one of such items). An interesting co-referential chain is however opened in the title of the novel. The words *Snow Country/Țara zăpezilor/雪国* open both an exophoric and an endophoric referential chain. The endophoric one is developed inside the text, by the repeated reference to the setting of the action. The exophoric referential chain poses some problems. Both in English and in Romanian, the referent of the syntagms “Snow Country” or “Țara zăpezilor” belongs to a fictitious, imaginary universe, since there is no real place called Snow Country/ Țara zăpezilor in the extra-textual world. In Japanese, however, the syntagm *雪国* (*yukiguni*) may actually refer to real geographical areas, namely places with heavy and deep snow – usually the prefectures on The Sea of Japan side of the main island of the Japanese archipelago. However, this type of

exophoric referential identification, although possible, is irrelevant to many Japanese when it comes to the novel *Snow Country*. The fictitious, imaginary exophoric reference is much stronger even in the case of Japanese people, so the different possible directions of interpretation are actually reduced to one in all of the three versions of the text.

The last network that we will refer to is the sememic one. In the quoted fragments, we identified three isotopies that may have a major influence on the interpretation of the global meaning of the novel. The three isotopies are [light], [cold] and [standstill]. The first one is illustrated by terms such as *white*, *lantern*, *snow* and, negatively, *darkness*, in English; in Romanian, we have *albi*, *lămpaș aprins*, *albeață* and *întuneric*, while in Japanese we have 雪, 白く, 明かり, 雪の色, 闇. The second isotopy – [cold] – can be identified in expressions such as *snow*, *snowy cold*, *muffler*, *frozen slope* (E), *zăpadă*, *suflu de aer înzăpezit*, *omuleț îmbrobodit*, *fular gros*, *frig*, *zgribulite* (R) and 雪の冷気、襟巻きで鼻の上まで包み、寒さ、寒々 (J). The last isotopy – [standstill] – is expressed by words such as *pulled up*, *signal stop* (E), *opriră*, *haltă* (R) and 止まった、信号所 駅 (J). The space that the protagonists enter once the first sentences are uttered is defined from the very beginning as a motionless, frozen one, where light and darkness – literally and figuratively – fight for supremacy.

The series of utterances that we chose for illustrating the reticular character of textual meaning proves to be much more than simply putting together syntactically-organized sentences. Even a very brief, sketchy analysis of only some of the networks presented in the first part of our paper can prove that the global meaning of a text is not the sum of the individual meanings of the sentences that form the text. The meaning networks enter very intricate combinations and it is this articulated system that allows us to catch a glimpse of what the world of the meaning can be.

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