

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE GIFT OF THE MAGI (Smith's Discourse Modes)

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ABSTRACT

Five Discourse Modes have been identified by Smith (2003), i.e. Narrative, Report, Descriptive, Information and Argument. Smith analyzes the properties that distinguish each mode, focusing on grammatical rather than lexical information. She has also examined presentational matters: topic and focus; variation in syntactic structure; and subjectivity, or point of view (2003, 1999, 1991). According to him, close linguistic analysis of the text through discourse modes helps understand the text. The short story "The Gift of the Magi" is analyzed applying the five modes of discourse with the objective if the analysis of the text could lead better understanding of the text. It is also analyzed if all the five modes are present in one type of text i.e. the Narrative here, and if their presence in the text enhances the understanding. The purpose of the analysis is to mark the stylistic effect of the Discourse Modes that may contribute to the better and proper understanding of the text, specifically from a pedagogical point of view.

Keywords: Discourse modes, foregrounded, backgrounded, topic chaining situation entities,

INTRODUCTION

"The Gift of the Magi" is a short story, one of several hundred written by O. Henry between 1903 and 1910. It was published in a New York City newspaper in 1905 and in a collection, *The Four Million*, in 1906. It is about Mr. and Mrs. James Dillingham Young and the events that happen on one Christmas Eve. This couple that also goes by James and Della does not have a lot of money. One dollar and eighty-seven cents is all Della has to her name and the next day was Christmas. Della felt this was not enough to buy her beloved James a decent Christmas present. Even though they did not have a lot, James and Della had two things that cherished in this world, besides each other. James loved his gold watch that had been passed down generations and Della loved her long, beautiful hair. They both took great pride in these items. In an effort to buy James a present, Della goes into town and sells her hair to Madame Sofronie. She receives twenty dollars for this sacrifice. Then Della goes to another store in town and purchases a great chain worthy of James's watch. When James arrives home, he noticed that Della cut all of her hair off. Della thinks he is upset about what she has done but then Della sees why he is taken off guard. James then gives Della her present and to her surprise it is a set of beautiful combs; for the hair she cut off. Della then gives James her present. He opens it to find the watch chain. She then asks for James to fetch his watch so she can see the chain on it. Instead, James flops down on the couch and smiles and says: "Let's put our Christmas presents away and keep 'em a while. They're too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs."

THEMES IN THE STORY

Wealth and Poverty

Poverty is the main theme in the story. Within the first paragraph of the story we know that the Youngs are very poor. Porter launches us into their lives by writing *“One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies. Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one’s cheeks burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied.”*

Generosity

Generosity is a major theme in *Gift of the Magi*. Clearly, any story that focuses on gift-giving as its major plot-line must deal with the concept of generosity. However, Porter is interested in something deeper than superficial generosity of giving a gift that comes easily. He is interested in generosity born out of a love so deep it transcends reason or wisdom. Love, such as we see between Jim and Della.

Both Jim and Della sell their personal treasure in order to enhance the treasure of the other. Della sells her hair in order to buy a watch chain for Jim’s only valuable inheritance. Jim sells his watch in order to enhance Della’s crowning glory. The narrator of the story comments on their actions by saying *“And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest.”*

Love

Della and Jim give each other the best of all possible gifts, love. It does not matter that Jim no longer has the gold watch to display on the elegant chain that Della gave him. Nor does it matter that Della no longer has long, luxurious hair to comb with the gift Jim gave her. What matters is that they have is each other. (Cummings 2006)

In the paragraph where we are introduced to Jim, the writer gives us an idea of Della’s exuberant affection for Jim when he says *“whenever Mr. James Dillingham Young came home and reached his flat above he was called “Jim” and greatly hugged by Mrs. James Dillingham Young, already introduced to you as Della. Which is all very good.”*

When the narrator writes *“Which is all very good.”* He hints that there must be more in a marriage. And in some small way Jim sums it up when he sees his gift from Della and says *“They’re too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs.”* His statement seems a natural commentary on the uselessness of the gifts since their intended purpose has been ironically removed.

However, Jim’s remark, is also a comment on the value of the gifts. They are too nice not only because of the money they represent but also because of the sacrificial love they represent. Self-sacrifice in the name of love is the wisest gift.

THE ANALYSIS

An effort has been made to make analysis of the short story applying some of the salient features of Discourse Modes. The focus is to show some understanding of this model of discourse, a few passages from the story have been selected and analyzed. The passages are analyzed according to temporality, types of entities, subjectivity, patterns of organization in the text, etc.

Foregrounding and back grounding in the text

Foregrounded information is the most important and the background material is supportive. The distinction has been discussed mainly for narrative texts. In a narrative, information is backgrounded if it fails to contribute to the progression of the text or if it involves entities that are not characteristics of the Narrative Discourse Mode.

The text under discussion is a piece of Narrative Mode. The text is analyzed to see how information is foregrounded and how the background information supports the main development of the text.

One dollar and eighty-seven cents. S1That was all. S2And sixty cents of it was in pennies. S3Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied. S4Three times Della counted it. S5One dollar and eighty-seven cents. S6And the next day would be Christmas.

All the clauses are unbounded so clearly they are the background because they do not contribute to the text progression. S4 is a bounded event and advances the time of the narrative. It is interesting to note that the backgrounded information is not less important to the story line.

S1There was clearly nothing to do but flop down on the shabby little couch and howl.S2 So Della did it. S3Which instigates the moral reflection that life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles, with sniffles predominating. (Para 2)

Again the Para 2 has only one foregrounded information i.e. *so Della did it*, but the backgrounded information really adds to the colors of the story as it enhances the emotional effects on the readers.

In the vestibule below was a letter-box into which no letter would go, and an electric button from which no mortal finger could coax a ring. Also appertaining thereunto was a card bearing the name "Mr. James Dillingham Young." (Para 4)

The whole paragraph is backgrounded. Yet it gives some important information that adds to the understanding of the story line.

S1Della finished her cry and attended to her cheeks with the powder rag. S2She stood by the window and looked out dully at a gray cat walking a gray fence in a gray backyard. S3Tomorrow would be Christmas Day, and she had only \$1.87 with which to buy Jim a present. S4She had been saving every penny she could for months, with this result. S5Twenty dollars a week doesn't go far. S6Expenses had been greater than she had calculated. S7They always are. S8Only \$1.87 to buy a present for Jim. Her Jim. S9Many a happy hour she had spent planning for something nice for him. S10Something fine and rare and sterling—something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honor of being owned by Jim. (Para 6)

The foregrounded information is presented in S1 and S2 that have bounded events with perfective viewpoint. They contribute to the progression of the text. S3 shows progression through time adverbial *tomorrow*. S4 shows an ongoing event in the past perfect. S3-S10 all are backgrounded as they add nothing to the advancement in narrative time.

S1The door opened and Jim stepped in and closed it. S2He looked thin and very serious. S3Poor fellow, he was only twenty-two—and to be burdened with a family! S4He needed a new overcoat and he was without gloves. (Para 20)

Here again only S1 contains three verbs with perfective viewpoint. They contribute to the progression of the text. The remaining information is part of the background.

It may be surprising to note that the paragraphs appear to have more back grounded information. This does not mean that the text has nothing significant only because it has more back grounded information as the word may confuse. Back grounded information is always supportive to main story line. It helps to understand the text in a better way with a better comprehension of the whole text.

Patterns of organization in the text

Various combinations of the patterns may appear in the text. The analysis will show what patterns have been applied in this short story. Following is the opening paragraph of the story.

One dollar and eighty-seven cents. S1That was all. S2And sixty cents of it was in pennies. S3Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied. S4Three times Della counted it. S5One dollar and eighty-seven cents. S6And the next day would be Christmas.

The two bold words show FOCUS-TOPIC CHAINING (a linear pattern in which the focus phrase referent of one sentence appears as topic of the next). **Pennies** is the focused referent of S2 and the topic referent of S3.

S1She found it at last.S2 It surely had been made for Jim and no one else. S3There was no other like it in any of the stores, and she had turned all of them inside out.S4 It was a platinum fob chain simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by meretricious ornamentation—as all good things should do.

(Para 14)

The paragraph gives the example of FOCUS-TOPIC CHAINING as *it* in S1 is the focus and it changes to topic in the next clause in S2. Same pattern can be detected in the initial clause of S1 where *it* is the focus and the next clause introduces it as topic which refers to platinum fob chain.

S1Della finished her cry and attended to her cheeks with the powder rag. S2She stood by the window and looked out dully at a gray cat walking a gray fence in a gray backyard. S3Tomorrow would be Christmas Day, and she had only \$1.87 with which to buy Jim a present.S4She had been saving every penny she could for months, with this result.S5Twenty dollars a week doesn't go far.S6Expenses had been greater than she had calculated. S7They always are. S8Only \$1.87 to buy a present for Jim. Her Jim. S9Many a happy hour she had spent planning for something nice for him.S10Something fine and rare and sterling—something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honor of being owned by Jim. (Para 6)

The paragraph shows TOPIC CHAINING (continuous theme). S1 – S4, S9 all have same topic. S1 begins with *Della* as topic. Other sentences repeat the same pattern with *she* as topic, replacing the name *Della*. The second clause of S6 also has the same topic. The shift from name to pronoun has its effects as the repetition of the name may appear monotonous. And the author has deliberately avoided the repetition. S6 and S7 have the same topic too. *Expenses* is the topic of S6 with replacement *they* in S7.

S1She found it at last.S2 It surely had been made for Jim and no one else. S3There was no other like it in any of the stores, and she had turned all of them inside out.S4 It was a platinum fob chain simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value by

*substance alone and not by meretricious ornamentation—as all good things should do.***S5** *It was even worthy of The Watch.***S6** *As soon as she saw it she knew that it must be Jim's.***S7** *It was like him.***S8** *Quietness and value—the description applied to both.***S9** *Twenty-one dollars they took from her for it, and she hurried home with the 87 cents.***S10** *With that chain on his watch Jim might be properly anxious about the time in any company.* **S11** *Grand as the watch was, he sometimes looked at it on the sly on account of the old leather strap that he used in place of a chain. (Para 14)*

Again TOPIC CHAINING is quite apparent a technique used in the cited paragraph. S2, S4, S5, S7 have the same topic *it* used to refer to the platinum fob chain introduced in S4.

S1 *For there lay The Combs—the set of combs, side and back, that Della had worshipped long in a Broadway window.* **S2** *Beautiful combs, pure tortoise shell, with jeweled rims—just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair.* **S3** *They were expensive combs, she knew, and her heart had simply craved and yearned over them without the least hope of possession.* **S4** *And now, they were hers, but the tresses that should have adorned the coveted adornments were gone. (Para 27)*

Paragraph 27 exhibits the same pattern i.e. TOPIC CHAINING. S2, S3 and S4 have same topic referents, *beautiful combs* in S2, and *they* in S3 and S4.

S1 *Jim stopped inside the door, as immovable as a setter at the scent of quail.***S2** *His eyes were fixed upon Della, and there was an expression in them that she could not read, and it terrified her.***S3** *It was not anger, nor surprise, nor disapproval, nor horror, nor any of the sentiments that she had been prepared for.***S4** *He simply stared at her fixedly with that peculiar expression on his face. (Para 21)*

Looking at the topic referents of each sentence of the cited paragraph, it is evident that there is no chaining of the topic or focus-topic. *Jim* is the topic of S1. S2 has four clauses with different topic referents. S3 has two clauses with *it* and *she* as topic referents. S4 introduces *he* as topic. Such a pattern is an UNCHAINED PATTERN.

S1 *Out of his trance Jim seemed quickly to wake.* **S2** *He enfolded his Della.* **S3** *For ten seconds let us regard with discreet scrutiny some inconsequential object in the other direction.* **S4** *Eight dollars a week or a million a year—what is the difference?* **S5** *A mathematician or a wit would give you the wrong answer.* **S6** *The magi brought valuable gifts, but that was not among them.* **S7** *This dark assertion will be illuminated later on. (Para 24)*

The cited paragraph again shows the same pattern i.e. UNCHAINED PATTERN, with almost every clause with a different topic referent.

It has been observed that the story is enriched with almost all the three patterns of presentational progression with their various effects on the text. It has been observed that almost all the topic phrases tend to appear at the beginning of a sentence functioning as subjects. It is a recurring feature in the text, with the subjects passing relatively familiar information.

Situation entities and text progression

One dollar and eighty-seven cents. **S1** *That was all.* **S2** *And sixty cents of it was in pennies.* **S3** *Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied.* **S4** *Three times Della counted it.* **S5** *One dollar and eighty-seven cents.* **S6** *And the next day would be Christmas.*

In the opening paragraph, there is no temporal progression, except in S5. Though the verbs *saved* and *burned* are telic yet they are made atelic (applying the coercion principal) as they do not contribute to the progression of the text. Time adverbials (*until*, *the next day*) are introduced in the paragraph, yet they do not progress the text time. *Until* refers to the past event and *the next day* to the future. Both are with reference to the narrative time. Only S4 *Three times Della counted it* has an Event verb constellation with a perfective viewpoint. It introduces a bounded event.

Initial 5 paragraphs, including the opening one, contain mostly States and ongoing events with imperfective viewpoint. In para 2, the sentence *So Della did it* shows a bounded event. The purpose of introducing States and unbounded entities appears to give a sort of description to establish background for the events to take place and to give a better understanding of the proceedings of the story.

S1*There was clearly nothing to do but flop down on the shabby little couch and howl.***S2***So Della did it.* **S3***Which instigates the moral reflection that life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles, with sniffles predominating.* (Para 2)

S1*While the mistress of the home is gradually subsiding from the first stage to the second, take a look at the home.* **S2***A furnished flat at \$8 per week.* **S3***It did not exactly beggar description, but it certainly had that word on the lookout for the mendicancy squad.* (Para 3)

S3 of Para 2 marks a change to argument. Also the author changes the narrator, i.e. from an omnipresent narrator to the author himself. The involvement of the author is evident as it happens in Argument Mode. S3 is a proposition with a complement clause. The shift in mode indicates that the writer tries to limelight one of the hard realities of life that is related to the events developed in the story. It helps readers to make up their minds that some sorrowful incident is about to occur. Para 3 continues with the argument. The author's involvement decreases from S2. It is closer to commentary pole from S2.

There is again shift from argument to description in Para 4. The text progresses through spatial advancement.

In the vestibule below was a letter-box into which no letter would go, and an electric button from which no mortal finger could coax a ring. Also appertaining thereunto was a card bearing the name "Mr. James Dillingham Young." (Para 4)

The shift of modes continues in the 5th Para also. The author's involvement appears to be a regular feature of the text, though with different intensities. At times he is directly and very closely involved and at other times he keeps himself at a distance.

S1*Della finished her cry and attended to her cheeks with the powder rag.* **S2***She stood by the window and looked out dully at a gray cat walking a gray fence in a gray backyard.* **S3***Tomorrow would be Christmas Day, and she had only \$1.87 with which to buy Jim a present.* **S4***She had been saving every penny she could for months, with this result.* **S5***Twenty dollars a week doesn't go far.* **S6***Expenses had been greater than she had calculated.* **S7***They always are.* **S8***Only \$1.87 to buy a present for Jim. Her Jim.* **S9***Many a happy hour she had spent planning for something nice for him.* **S10***Something fine and rare and sterling—something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honor of being owned by Jim.* (Para 6)

This paragraph is a fine example of the shifts of modes and it probably encompasses the whole pattern of the text. S1 and S2 are in narrative mode with bounded events. S3 shows progression through time adverbial *tomorrow* though it does not add to narrative time. S4 shows past perfect continuous tense.

And sudden change to Argument Mode with the author's direct involvement appears in S5 and then S7 with an unbounded event in between the two i.e. in S6.

S1*She found it at last.***S2***It surely had been made for Jim and no one else.***S3***There was no other like it in any of the stores, and she had turned all of them inside out.***S4***It was a platinum fob chain simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by meretricious ornamentation—as all good thing should do.***S5***It was even worthy of The Watch.***S6***As soon as she saw it she knew that it must be Jim's.***S7***It was like him.***S8***Quietness and value—the description applied to both.***S9***Twenty-one dollars they took from her for it, and she hurried home with the 87 cents.***S10***With that chain on his watch Jim might be properly anxious about the time in any company.***S11***Grand as the watch was, he sometimes looked at it on the sly on account of the old leather strap that he used in place of a chain. (Para 14)*

The clauses with event verb constellations (S1, S9) have the perfective viewpoint, presenting bounded events. They are taken as sequential, advancing the narrative, on the continuity tense pattern. States are expressed in S2-S8, S10 and S11. They are located at the preceding reference time on the limited anaphora tense pattern. The state sentences constitute a small descriptive passage in themselves.

S1*Out of his trance Jim seemed quickly to wake.***S2***He enfolded his Della.***S3***For ten seconds let us regard with discreet scrutiny some inconsequential object in the other direction.***S4***Eight dollars a week or a million a year—what is the difference?***S5***Mathematician or a wit would give you the wrong answer.***S6***The magi brought valuable gifts, but that was not among them.***S7***This dark assertion will be illuminated later on. (Para 24)*

The above-cited paragraph repeats the tendency of the author's involvement in the text. S2 is bounded events with perfective viewpoint and the text progresses according to advancement in narrative time. And then the author appears as the narrator. Tense changes are frequent. In S3, tense is present, which changes to past in S6. Tense changes again into future in S7. Though S6 has a perfective event, yet it does not contribute to the advancement of the text.

S1*The magi, as you know, were wise men—wonderfully wise men—who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger.***S2***They invented the art of giving Christmas presents.***S3***Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication.***S4***And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house.***S5***But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest.***S6***Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest.***S7***Everywhere they are wisest.***S8***They are the magi. (Para 33)*

The last paragraph of the story does not advance the time at all as it is only the commentary of the author on the characters or the story. Here the author has introduced the First person narrator that shows the deep and direct involvement of the author himself in the text, a permanent feature of this story that is at its maximum in the end. Time moves to and fro with reference to the narrator's speech time. The order of events does not determine interpretation rather the standpoint of the reporter is the organizing factor.

The story is not concluded in a typical fashion. The shift of mode in the last Para is the marker showing the end of the story. Another feature which this switched mode brings into focus is the sympathies of the readers the author wants to win for the characters of the story. His concluding remarks lead the readers to think what the author wants them to think about Della and Jim. Had he not commented in this manner in the concluding Para, there might have been variety of feelings attached

to the characters. But the author's direct comments appear to be an attempt to manipulate the readers' sentiments in favor of the characters.

Subjectivity in the text

Forms of subjectivity indicate access to mind of either the author or the participant. In the text under discussion there are several forms that indicate subjectivity as they give access to the mind of the author or the character

*The "Dillingham" had been flung to the breeze during a former period of prosperity when its possessor was being paid \$30 per week. Now, when the income was shrunk to \$20, though, they were thinking seriously of contracting to a modest and unassuming D. But whenever Mr. James Dillingham Young came home and reached his flat above he was called "Jim" and greatly hugged by Mrs. James Dillingham Young, already introduced to you as Della. **Which is all very good.** (Para 5)*

The last sentence of the paragraph gives access to the mind of the author. It is implied that the author gives a value judgment about the practice of the couple.

*So now Della's beautiful hair fell about her rippling and shining like a cascade of brown waters. It reached below her knee and made itself almost a garment for her. And then she did it up again **nervously** and **quickly**. Once she faltered for a minute and stood still while a tear or two splashed on the worn red carpet. (Para 10)*

The two bold adverbs show that something was happening in Della's mind, something that has made her nervous. Della is the experiencer and she is a participant.

*Where she stopped the sign read: "Mne. Sofronie. Hair Goods of All Kinds." One flight up Della ran, and collected herself, panting. Madame, large, too white, chilly, **hardly looked the "Sofronie."** (P 12)*

The bold phrase again gives us an insight into the mind of either Della or the author or both of them. The reader feels that the author has sided himself with one participant Della by showing some sympathy for her and representing Mne. Sofronie as a professional lady, least concerned with feelings and sentiments of Della.

*The door opened and Jim stepped in and closed it. He looked thin and very serious. **Poor fellow**, he was only twenty-two—and to be **burdened** with a family! He needed a new overcoat and he was without gloves. (Para 20)*

The bold phrase *poor fellow* and the word *burdened* again give access to look at the process going into the mind of either Della (a participant) or the author. The expressions show that the author wants the readers feel sorry for Jim by arousing their emotions or it is Della who feels sympathy for her husband. Both the expressions are forms of subjectivity.

*"You've cut off your hair?" asked Jim, **laboriously**, as if he had not arrived at that patent fact yet even after the hardest mental labor.*
"Cut it off and sold it," said Della. "Don't you like me just as well, anyhow? I'm me without my hair, ain't I?"
*Jim looked about the room **curiously**. (Para 23)*

The word *laboriously* reveals the present mental state of Jim who is experiencing the least expected incident of his life. Not that he was tired when he entered the house, but what he saw was unbelievable. It appears that the incident had affected him badly and he could not digest it. Again the

word *curiously* adds something to the information about what was happening inside the mind of Jim. He still did not seem to believe what he had seen.

Several other examples of forms showing subjectivity may be traced in the text. These forms help reveal the mind of the participant or the author giving an access to their minds.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of a text through Discourse Modes is a useful activity as it categorizes the passages according to certain features specific to a particular type of mode. The study of syntactic structures and linguistic features of a text may prove helpful in the understanding of a text. It has been observed that there are several systems working in a piece of narrative, the study of which is extremely helpful in comprehending the text, particularly from teaching and learning point of view.

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