

## Metadiscourse and the Evasive Narrator : A Process-Based Approach to Teaching Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*.

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This article explores the application of a process-based methodology in the reading of a recent fictional text with international undergraduates. Illustrated by practical tasks on narrative voice designed to build awareness of metadiscursive markers and their functions, the article makes a case for a methodology which is essentially stylistic in its focus, but which can lay the foundation for class discussions that go beyond issues of style. I also show that, although geared to the needs of the more advanced learner, the tasks may be adapted for use with less proficient readers and linked, where appropriate, to work on structure and usage.

### INTRODUCTION

As defined by Nash (1992:99) metadiscourse is "a kind of commentary, made in the course of speaking or writing", the "essential feature" of which is that it is "not appended to the text, like a footnote or a postscript, but is incorporated with it, in the form of words and phrases fitted in to the unfolding message". Nash differentiates between what he calls "tactical" and "lexical" metadiscursive functions, the former concerned with marking text structure (as when a lecturer might indicate planning with expressions like "In this lecture I propose to discuss..." or remind the listeners of points made earlier with "Up to this point I have...") and the latter with a speaker's or writer's commentary on the propositional content of the text, for example through expressions used to emphasise ("Of course"...), or evaluate ("Strangely enough..."), or make concessions ("Admittedly", etc.). In this article my purpose is to illustrate how Nash's suggested categories for different kinds of metadiscursive function might be usefully applied to the teaching in the EFL classroom of a novel such as Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, in which narrative mediation is not only a central stylistic but also, inevitably, a critical issue. In this novel, a participating narrator leads us by means of an intriguingly controlled narrative into his guilt-ridden past, towards a gradual discovery of its intersection, or confluence, with a fictional present of 1956. The book can be seen as an example of "metafiction", a genre also exemplified in the work of such writers as Graham Swift, Peter Ackroyd, A.S. Byatt and Julian Barnes.

Stylistics meets a need which I have encountered with my non-native speakers in reading and interpreting texts. Non-native readers often miss the hidden discourse

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in a text, concentrating instead on surface features. However, if stylistic features are drawn to their attention it is often easy for L2 students to grasp as they frequently have extensive experience of the close study of language. To draw on their existing experience of the language and ask them to focus on particular linguistic forms, and gradually the more subtle functions of these forms, can also be more reassuring to international students than open-ended questions requiring, usually too early, more abstract or evaluative answers. Also, stylistic approaches, if suitably tailored to their level of proficiency and experience, can help L2 students relate the work they do in literature modules more easily to their ongoing language learning and formal language studies, thus strengthening their overall motivation.

### THE TEXT AND ITS NARRATIVE

The narrator of *The Remains of the Day* is Stevens, the ageing butler at Darlington Hall, the former home of Lord Darlington but now owned by an American, Mr Farraday. Stevens's new employer suggests the butler might like to take a drive to the West Country for a short break. Stevens's world has up to now been rigidly limited to the house and its immediate surroundings, but he nonetheless decides to venture into unknown territory. This is primarily because he hopes to see a former housekeeper at Darlington Hall, Miss Kenton, who has been gone many years and is now married with a family of her own. Stevens refuses to admit it either to himself or to the reader, but he was in love with Miss Kenton and still regrets not having expressed his true feelings for her when they worked together. It is now too late, of course, and although the two eventually meet, there is no possibility of Miss Kenton's returning to Darlington Hall or of her marrying Stevens. Stevens's tale has the inevitability of tragedy: he finally has no option but to return to the service of his new employer. Ironically, he expresses the hope that he will be able to entertain Mr Farraday by learning to speak in a more light-hearted way, or to "banter", but this wish only serves to reinforce his sad destiny as someone for whom the greatest goal is still to please others rather than to find fulfilment himself. By this stage, Stevens has also come to the realisation that he was greatly mistaken in admiring Lord Darlington so blindly and in assuming that this English aristocrat's political views were bound to be trustworthy when in fact they were quite the opposite. Lord Darlington turns out to have been a Nazi sympathiser and pawn in the hands of the British Union of Fascists, exploited for his gentlemanly good nature. On all fronts, therefore, Stevens has cause to feel a bitter sense of guilt and disappointment, yet, as we shall see, his narrative does everything it can to camouflage these feelings.

*The Remains of the Day* comes across as a real-life confession, though what is fascinating about Stevens's narrative is its general avoidance of anything that could be called "confessional" in style, together with its elaborate strategy of self-justification or "hedging". As Forceville (1996:140) notes, "the reader has to infer what really happened by disentangling the evasive account of the narrator". In this

novel we have a sense of a smooth surface that definitely doesn't look as if it could be ruffled, but ultimately *is*. As we shall see when we look in detail at the metadiscursive markers of Stevens's language, the narrator's control over his narrative seems to lessen as time goes on, with insecurity and the sense of loss being increasingly revealed through the recurrent use of particular kinds of textual comments and appeals to the implied reader. That reader appears to be someone of the same generation, background and gender as the butler himself, since Stevens seems to presume a certain familiarity on the part of the reader with particular topics and events connected with English society and the world of domestic service in the early decades of the twentieth century, as well as social changes in the 1950s, the fictional present. At one point he comments, referring to the employment of staff in large houses, that in "this age of electricity and modern heating systems, there is no need at all to employ the sorts of numbers necessary even a generation ago", which reminds the **actual** reader that the "now" of the novel is quite some time back. Then there is a proliferation of expressions like "As you might expect", "I think you will understand", "You may be amazed...,but then you will agree", which suggest that Stevens assumes, or would like to assume, that we are essentially sympathetic towards him and likely to accept his version of events, even if we may be paying close attention to certain inconsistencies.

### METHODOLOGY AND MATERIALS

In my teaching of *The Remains of the Day* I have found it helpful, once students have read at least the first section of the text ("Prologue: July 1956 - Darlington Hall") to draw attention to metadiscourse as an introduction to the critical study of narrative point-of-view, and the question of reader positioning in the novel. A process-based approach, drawing on techniques that "interfere" with the text, enabling students to compare original and sometimes deliberately altered versions of specific passages, to fill gaps, to re-arrange or even to write creatively in particular styles, is a type of approach that is well suited to this purpose. This kind of methodology, according to Carter (1996:3) helps students to experience literary texts "directly as part of a process of meaning-creation" (see also Widdowson (1992) on similar strategies for the teaching of poetry). Such an immediate experience of literature is very much less likely to result from an approach that treats the text as an untouchable artefact, one that refuses to allow it to be opened up explicitly and systematically or to affirm the centrality of language.

Of course, in our enthusiasm for practical stylistic approaches we need to guard against the risk of ignoring the historical and socio-cultural contexts that are an essential part of literary criticism. A language is not a neutral system which will disclose all its meanings to all readers through objective linguistic analysis. Therefore, in the context of work on narrative point-of-view, it is important that, once students have understood what metadiscourse is and can locate instances of it

for themselves, they are encouraged to see it in relation to other, broader aspects and readings of the text. The discourse of deference practised by Stevens has to be seen in the context of the traditions, hierarchies and conventions of servant life in English country houses, as documented for example by Pamela Horn (1975).

In the materials which I shall now illustrate I tried to encourage students to move gradually from the analysis of extracts to whole-text reading. The tasks were designed to begin with awareness-building and to progress through a stage of further practical analysis to the final stage linking language study and critical interpretation or comparison. At each stage my objective was to give students tasks that were as clearly defined and motivating as possible and would illustrate an increasing level of sophistication. I encouraged students to work in pairs or small groups, once they had had enough time for individual concentration or attention to detail. What follows is an example of a worksheet illustrating the type of work done at each stage and including suggested ways of adapting the material for use with less proficient language learners:

### WORKSHEET "A":

#### MEDIATED NARRATIVE

Compare A (the original opening of the novel) and B (a version in which certain words and phrases have been deliberately omitted). When you have studied the differences between them, discuss the following questions:

- What do the omitted words and phrases tell us about the narrator?
- What difference do they make to our reading of the opening of the published text?

A) It seems increasingly likely that I really will undertake the expedition that has been preoccupying my imagination now for some days. An expedition, I should say, which I will undertake alone, in the comfort of Mr Farraday's Ford; an expedition which, as I foresee it, will take me through much of the finest countryside of England to the West Country, and may keep me away from Darlington Hall for as much as five or six days. The idea of such a journey came about, I should point out, from a most kind suggestion put to me by Mr Farraday himself one afternoon almost a fortnight ago, when I had been dusting the portraits in the library. In fact, as I recall, I was up on the step-ladder dusting the portrait of Viscount Wetherby when my employer had entered carrying a few volumes which he presumably wished returned to the shelves.

(Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*, p.3)

B) I will undertake the expedition that has been preoccupying my imagination now for some days. An expedition which I will undertake alone, in the comfort of Mr

Farraday's Ford; an expedition which will take me through much of the finest countryside of England to the West Country, and may keep me away from Darlington Hall for as much as five or six days. The idea of such a journey came about from a most kind suggestion put to me by Mr Farraday himself one afternoon almost a fortnight ago, when I had been dusting the portraits in the library. I was up on the step-ladder dusting the portrait of Viscount Wetherby when my employer had entered carrying a few volumes which he wished returned to the shelves.

The point of this first task is to highlight the different ways in which the frequency of tentative modal expressions ("it seems"; "increasingly likely"; "presumably", etc.), or tactical markers of the narration itself ("I should say"; "I should point out") makes the reader conscious of the presence of the mediating narrator. Less proficient learners could be asked to focus first on the precise meanings and levels of formality of the various markers, for example through working out, with the help of a dictionary, which ones are synonymous with "I suppose", "I expect" or "actually".

### WORKSHEET "B":

#### STEVENS' STYLE

The following words and phrases have been removed from the extract below. Try to replace them as appropriately as you can, considering where Stevens might typically have used them in his narrative. When you have finished, compare your version with the original text. The passage occurs at the point where Stevens has, out of the blue, been asked by Lord Darlington to convey the "facts of life" to the son of Sir David Cardinal. Both the young man's father and Lord Darlington himself have clearly found the task too embarrassing:

(For convenience, the words to be removed are here left in the text and shown in italics.)

I was, *as you might imagine*, a little taken aback by this request and ordinarily the matter might have been one I would have spent some time pondering. Coming upon me as it did, however, in the midst of such a busy period, I could not afford to let it preoccupy me unduly, and I *thus* decided I should resolve it at the earliest opportunity. *As I recall, then*, it was only an hour or so after being first entrusted with the mission that I noticed the young Cardinal alone in the library, sitting at one of the writing tables, absorbed in some documents. On studying the young gentleman closely, one could, *as it were*, appreciate the difficulty experienced by his lordship - and *indeed*, by the young gentleman's father.

(p.83)



This worksheet goes a step further than the first in drawing students' attention to the structural aspects of the metadiscursive markers used by Stevens and their positioning within the clause. Discussion can follow on the difference in meaning that alternative positioning might bring about (compare "One could, as it were, appreciate the difficulty experienced by his lordship" with "One could appreciate the difficulty, as it were, experienced by his lordship"). Less experienced learners might be given more opportunity to explore the relative formality levels of the different markers, consulting a dictionary for further examples of usage in everyday contexts. A further very useful exploitation of this passage could involve students attempting to re-write it in less formal English, so that "entrusted with the mission", for instance, would become "given the job". Students could then discuss what is lost in terms of connotative meanings when we simplify such a text.

### WORKSHEET "C" :

#### METADISCOURSE AND THE REMAINS OF THE DAY

Read the following three extracts from the early, middle and final part of the novel. Identify the types of metadiscourse used by Stevens in each passage. Is there any evidence of a change in this aspect of the narrative voice as the novel progresses? If so, what influence might it have on our reading of the whole text?

*The first extract occurs in the section "Day Two - Morning: Salisbury", when Stevens is on his way to the West Country. Though enjoying the liberating feeling of being away from familiar territory, he is nevertheless engrossed in his own thoughts about the past, the former Housekeeper Miss Kenton and his father, who had come to live at Darlington Hall in old age and declining health:*

i) But I feel I should return just a moment to the matter of my father; for it strikes me I may have given the impression earlier that I treated him rather bluntly over his declining abilities. The fact is, there was little choice but to approach the matter as I did - as I am sure you will agree once I have explained the full context of those days. That is to say, the important international conference to take place at Darlington Hall was by then looming ahead of us, leaving little room for indulgence or 'beating about the bush'. It is important to be reminded, moreover, that although Darlington Hall was to witness many more events of equal gravity over the fifteen or so years that followed, that conference of March 1923 was the first of them; one was, one supposes, relatively inexperienced, and inclined to leave little to chance. (69-70)

*The next passage, from "Day Two - Afternoon: Mortimer's Pond, Dorset", follows much discussion on the part of Stevens about the definition of "greatness" in a butler and about the concept of the "distinguished household". His clarity on*

*these matters is undermined, however, by the fact that he admits he has now twice denied ever having worked for Lord Darlington.*

ii) Let me say that Lord Darlington was a gentleman of great moral stature - a stature to dwarf most of these persons you will find talking this sort of nonsense about him - and I will readily vouch that he remained that to the last. Nothing could be less accurate than to suggest that I regret my association with such a gentleman. Indeed, you will appreciate that to have served his lordship at Darlington Hall during those years was to come as close to the hub of this world's wheel as one such as I could ever have dreamt. I gave thirty-five years' service to Lord Darlington; one would surely not be unjustified in claiming that during those years, one was, in the truest terms, "attached to a distinguished household". In looking back over my career thus far, my chief satisfaction derives from what I achieved during those years, and I am today nothing but proud and grateful to have been given such a privilege. (126)

*The final extract occurs the day before Stevens returns to Darlington Hall. His trip to Cornwall and meeting with Mrs Benn (Miss Kenton) have not brought him any cause for hope that his personal life could be more fulfilled. Sitting on a bench on Weymouth pier, he has been speaking to a retired man who has tried to comfort him by saying that there is no point in looking back, and that the "evening" (of our lives) is for many the "best part of the day".*

iii) It is now some twenty minutes since the man left, but I have remained here on this bench to await the event that has just taken place - namely, the switching on of the pier lights. As I say, the happiness with which the pleasure-seekers gathering on this pier greeted this small event would tend to vouch for the correctness of my companion's words; for a great many people, the evening is the most enjoyable part of the day. Perhaps, then, there is something to his advice that I should cease looking back so much, that I should adopt a more positive outlook and try to make the best of what remains of my day. After all, what can we ever gain in forever looking back and blaming ourselves if our lives have not turned out quite as we might have wished? The hard reality is, surely, that for the likes of you and I, there is little choice other than to leave our fate, ultimately, in the hands of those great gentlemen at the hub of this world who employ our services. What is the point in worrying oneself too much about what one could or could not have done to control the course one's life took? Surely, it is enough that the likes of you and I at least try to make our small contribution count for something true and worthy. And if some of us are prepared to sacrifice much in life in order to pursue such aspirations, surely that is in itself, whatever the outcome, cause for pride and contentment. (244)



*Worksheet C* offers the more difficult challenge of identifying changes in metadiscourse in passages taken from the beginning, middle and end of *The Remains of the Day*. Here, it would be helpful if students were first introduced to further examples of metadiscursive markers and their typical functions from the Summary Table provided by Nash (1992:114-115). I offer here a selection of the "lexical" moves and examples in Nash's model:

*limiters* ("Up to a point..."); *hedges* ("As far as I know..."); *emphatics* ("Quite obviously..."); *evaluatives* ("I am happy to say..."); *formulators* ("so to speak"); *appeals* ("How are we to read this?"); *directives* ("Consider this..."); *asides* ("in other words", "by the way", "as we shall see")

In the process of identifying the types of metadiscourse used in *Worksheet C*, students generally discover that the proportion of "hedges" and "appeals" is greater towards the end of the novel, by which time Stevens has become more aware of his personal loss and the pointlessness of his loyalty to the traditional order. While his style has not become more obviously confessional, it has nevertheless become more disturbed, and it is harder for him to convey the impression of self-control and moderation in feeling. Without recognising the presence of these tell-tale metadiscursive markers, however, students can sometimes adopt far too simplistic a reading of the ending of the novel, even believing, in some cases, that Stevens has finally freed himself of his past and will now live a genuinely happy life in the service of his new employer.

Although this worksheet is more critically challenging than the others, it can be quite easily adapted for use with less confident readers. Here are some suggestions:

1. Ask students to look at the places in the extracts where Stevens uses the pronoun "I" or "one". Is the choice purely random, or does he use "one" for particular reasons? Students could use a good dictionary to check their ideas against the entry for the word "one", noting any interesting points of usage.

2. Ask students to find synonyms for some of the more formal words used in the extracts: "gravity"; "witness"; "aspirations". Alternatively, ask them to explain the idiomatic expressions used by Stevens and say what their functions may be in the narrative (some expressions, like "at the hub of this world's wheel", are recurrent in the novel and form a central part of the butler's philosophy). Other expressions ("leave little [usually *nothing*] to chance") are rather hackneyed and show Stevens using accepted wisdom to mask the truth.

3. Ask students to check the dictionary entries for "impression", "stature", "vouch", "outlook", to see if they can find some of the collocations that occur in the extracts (e.g. "give the impression"; "moral stature"; "readily vouch"; "adopt a positive outlook"). This exercise will make them more aware of the predictability of Stevens's

language and his preference for ready-made phrasing, a point which even quite advanced learners studying this book may not discover easily for themselves.

## CONCLUSION

In this article I have discussed how metadiscourse contributes to a reader's understanding of a text. I have also outlined an awareness-raising approach which has proved to be effective with foreign language learners at several different levels of proficiency. The work I have suggested on *The Remains of the Day* could also be applied to texts from other genres such as journalism and political speeches. It could also be interesting to contrast the way metadiscourse functions in parallel genres such as film and novel.

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