

Descriptions in literary texts

Based on an overview of characteristic structures of describing as an action pattern, this article presents linguistic analyses of descriptive passages from literary narrative texts. The analyses bring out specific forms and functions of linguistic description and their interplay within the context of literary narration. An outlook briefly sketches didactic considerations for the teaching of literature based on the argumentative foundation of the text analyses presented in the article.

Descriptions feature in texts and discourses in institutional and non-institutional constellations. One characteristic of describing is that it is integrated in broader discourse and textual contexts and, as such, there is a functional orientation towards a greater purpose in such contexts. In this particular study, describing is understood as a linguistic action which has the purpose to facilitate an imaginary representation of what has been described. In the study at hand, describing is investigated in the context of literary narration.

Within the framework of pragmatic text analyses, key questions concern the relation of purposes and means between linguistic devices and their functional interplay as well as to the character of linguistic expressions and chains of expressions. The overarching question concerns specific functions of descriptive actions in the narrative context.

The article presents text analyses of five descriptive excerpts from literary narrative texts published after 1900. These analyses cover a description of a room in Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, descriptions of an object and a process from the subjective perspective of a character in the novel *Der Trafikant* by Robert Seethaler, a description of an action in process in Peter Bichsel's *San Salvador* and a description of a person from Franz Kafka's *Ein Traum*.

Take the example of the description of a room (Thomas Mann: *Buddenbrooks*): the possibility of the participants in the family conversation walking through the room in their imagination ("Gang durch den Vorstellungsraum", Rehbein 1984, p. 79) can be elaborated on in the detailed functional analysis. Here, determination with the definite article, for example, is analysed as a means to involve readers. The detailed description of the room under consideration is characterized by a complex procedural interplay between generic expressions, those which go into more detail or specify spatial characteristics and meta-communicative means with the help of which characterizations are 'staged' in a linguistically 'condensed' form.

The two extracts from Seethaler's *Der Trafikant* are used to work out how describing from the subjective perspective of the protagonist reveals his emotional constitution. Going beyond the visualization of the various object concerned, the ways in which the protagonist acts, perceives and reflects are conveyed. Readers get to know the protagonist and an attempt is made to recreate the perspective linked to the character's viewpoint that dominates the text.

By means of the description of an action in process in the short story *San Salvador*, Peter Bichsel demonstrates how zooming in to focus on seemingly banal details of the process being described visualizes for readers the run-up to a decision to act that was ultimately

not implemented by the protagonist, thus supporting the literary narration of emotional aspects of a relationship.

As part of the analysis of a descriptive passage in Franz Kafka's *Ein Traum*, the thesis is developed that the failure to meet the readers' expectations of a description (which are based on their knowledge of linguistic actions) contributes to the narrative staging of the dreamlike.

The outlook at the end of this paper outlines some didactic considerations: here it is a question of the extent to which exemplary functional considerations of descriptive structures and specific grammatical means can be profitably used for literary analyses and interpretative approaches in German lessons. Another didactic aspect concerns the area of reflecting about language: in relation to the action of describing within the framework of teaching literature, it is possible to work out which linguistic means appear to be characteristic of or suited to this action and how they are presented in a functional context. Literary-narrative manifestations of the action can be analysed as specific descriptive forms in a reflexive way.

References

Rehbein, Jochen (1984): Beschreiben, berichten und erzählen. In: Ehlich, Konrad (Hg.): Erzählen in der Schule. Tübingen: Narr, pp. 67–124.