

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The present study deals with the elements of narrative grammar in a single literary corpus of contemporary Polish. As the repertoire of linguistic means that may be deployed in the construction of a coherent narrative text is extensive and heterogeneous, manifesting on different hierarchical levels of analysis, this study will profile those which I consider to be the most prominent.

In recent decades, the grammar of narrative has become a major field of interest in linguistic inquiry, and no description of a language can be complete without a detailed analysis of its narrative subsystem. Moreover, as narrative grammar constitutes an important bridge between linguistic and literary analysis, its findings may contribute to the wide field of literary theory, particularly to narratological research.

It should be obvious that different languages employ different means for text structuring, even if the languages are genetically related or have a history of language contacts. In the case of genetically related languages, it is particularly important to be aware of the pitfalls involved in assuming that cognate forms perform cognate functions. Naturally, within a given language distinct text-types feature different combinations and distributions of devices. For example, many of the observations made regarding the structure of a scientific text are partially valid at best for the investigation of a narrative text.

For Polish, the comprehensive study of narrative grammar has been to some extent neglected, although there are descriptions of the syntactic function of individual lexemes or grammatical forms in narrative, while at the other extreme, there are inquiries into the epistemological structures and psychological processes

of the understanding of a text, classification of motifs in various types of narrative, and the like¹.

In principle, the identification of the literary structure of a text is primarily the task of literary analysis. I will refer to literary structure only to the extent that it manifests itself in the linguistic devices employed. I intend to define specific textual phenomena associated with the structure of the story as it is perceived by the reader. As in other fields of descriptive linguistic inquiry, the position adopted here is that of the listener (or, in the case of a written text, of the reader), rather than that of the speaker (or writer). This approach, as employed by structuralist linguistics, is not different in essence from the way in which the grammatical value of smaller constitutive textual elements and structures, such as morphemes, phrases, and clauses, are established.

The syntactic and macro-syntactic analysis of the text, focusing on the structuring of narrative, will lead to the discovery of formal means of information division and arrangement, cohesion, and boundary and linking signals for various textual units. The nature of these units, their interrelationships with other units, and their role in the text will be defined. To this end, the present work comprises a series of interlocking studies of the repertoire of devices that contribute to the construction of a coherent, multilayered, artistically sophisticated, narrative text: among the devices examined here are tense, verbal aspect, sentence patterns, particles and conjunctions, coordination and subordination, and word order.

Some remarks about tense, its place in modern theories of narrative grammar, and the situation in Polish are in order. In most contemporary theories of text-structure, especially regarding that of literary fiction, the most prominent role is ascribed to the use of tense (or to the use of tense-aspect as a single category)². Since the past is the tense form most commonly used in narrative, in languages with several past tenses the choice of tense serves as a text-organizing device, and tense switching is a valuable signal of textual boundaries and transitions. However, in Polish, there is no formal tense opposition within the sphere of past reference that could mark such textual oppositions.

¹ See e.g. the studies included in Owczarek *et al.* 2001 and in Bartmiński and Bartmińska 2004.

² A pioneer of this approach is Weinrich 1964 (1985); in Fleischman 1990, among others, the use of specific tenses and the opposition of tense are referred to in connection with all basic distinctions of text types and text portions presented.

The tense system of Polish has three members only: the present, the future (in its two aspectual variants), and the past tense (again, in two aspectual variants). In addition to these basic forms, a periphrastic remote past and a periphrastic perfect-like construction in a rare, non-systematic use may be added. Consequently, for Polish, the verbal category of tense cannot be considered a primary device for the organization of a narrative text. For past tense narration it is the distribution of perfective and imperfective verb forms that has to be investigated, and the correlation between the employment of aspectual form and the functional nature of text passages that needs to be established.

The text which forms the corpus of the present study is a collection of short stories by Stanisław Lem³; it is not only a collection of distinct short stories but also an integrated whole: the stories share the character of Pirx, who appears in each of the stories in a different situation and context. In the first story, *Test* [The test], Pirx is a novice student in a Cosmonaut Academy; in the story *Wypadek* [The accident], he is taking his final examinations and summer training; in other tales he is an active cosmonaut at progressive stages of his career; in the story *Opowiadanie Pirxa* [Pirx's tale] we are confronted with Pirx at the threshold of retirement.

It is clear that Lem's corpus is representative of contemporary narrative Polish; it is equally clear that any corpus-based statement does not – and is not intended to – apply to 'Polish' in general. The corpus is extensive, idiolectal, and linguistically homogeneous, and as such, is ideal for an investigation of the type undertaken here. Whether or not the descriptive-analytical statements made in the course of this book are relevant for other Polish corpora is a question that requires additional corpus-based studies, and cannot be answered *a priori*.

Another question – which will not be systematically explored here – is that of the linguistic awareness of the author: to what extent does the author *consciously* manipulate the available linguistic means in order to achieve his aesthetic goals? To what extent does the ordered, even systematic, nature of the linguistic phenomena described here reflect the structure of contemporary narrative Polish in general, or the literary artistry of Lem himself? To my mind, these are extremely important and intriguing questions, which must remain unanswered for now. However, for the present, it seems best to recognize that

³ *Opowieści o pilocie Pirxie*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie 1976.

all of the linguistic means employed by Lem are part of a system of synchronic options existing in contemporary Polish, i.e. nothing described here is foreign to or even unusual for standard Polish. It is the linguistic system of standard Polish as realized in Lem's idiolectal *parole* that is studied here.

Regarding the type of narrative examined here, we have to bear in mind that literary fiction is very different from non-literary or oral colloquial accounts which feature single-stream reports of events, often pertaining to personal experience, as presented for Polish narrative by Flashner in Tomlin 1987; it is also different from oral literature, which has its own structure, often highly sophisticated in its own right. Moreover, it is important to note that modern fiction does not necessarily follow traditional conventions of structure such as those characteristic of highly formulaic genres, e.g. folk tales or the medieval epic.

The study is divided into chapters based on formal features and patterns, except for the opening chapter, which provides a running analysis of the complete text of one story from the *Tales of Pirx the Pilot*. I have chosen to begin in this way in order to present specific usages, habits, and peculiarities of Lem's language, as well as his style and narrative technique, at the same time introducing, through illustration rather than theorizing, the characterization of specific text segments and the means of information division and arrangement.

In the subsequent chapters, the various devices of text structuring are treated more systematically, taking into account the whole corpus. Clearly, any analysis of a phenomenon or pattern in a specific chapter will address this feature in relation to a conglomerate of features more thoroughly treated in their respective chapters, resulting in a modicum of overlap to be expected in such a holistic approach.

Only sporadically will reference be made to the research dealing with general issues of narrative and to its analysis in various languages. More attention will be paid to research concerning specific facts of the Polish language.