

REVIEWS

- M. WHEELER, *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology*;
 A. HORSMAN, *The Victorian Novel. Oxford History of English Literature vol XIII. Norman Vance* 80
 J. CORBETT, *English for International Banking and Finance. Joe Trotta* 82
 N. VANCE, *Irish Literature: A Social History. Tradition, Identity and Difference. Riana O'Dwyer* 83
 M. LJUNG, *A Study of TEFL Vocabulary. Gösta Krantz* 84
 D. TANNEN, *You Just Don't Understand. Women and Men in Conversation. Mats Mobärg* 85
 M. WANDRUSZKA, *Die europäische Sprachengemeinschaft. Deutsch-Französisch-English-Italienisch-Spanisch im Vergleich*;
 M. WANDRUSZKA, „Wer fremde Sprachen nicht kennt...“ *Das Bild des Menschen in Europas Sprachen. Gunnar Magnusson* 86
 G. HANSEN, *Textlinguistische Analyse von Gebrauchstexten (Handelshøjskolen i København, skriftraekke J, erhvervsproglige skrifter 20). Elzbieta Szwieikowska-Olsson* 88
 G. SCHREITER/A. STEDJE, *Svensk-tysk ordlista över högskoletermer. Klaus Rosenbeck* 91
 W. MÜLLER, „Dichter-Helden in der DDR-Literatur der siebziger Jahre. Carola Wiemers“ 94
 V. KLASSON, *Bewußtheit, Emanzipation und Frauenproblematik in „Der geteilte Himmel“ und drei weiteren Texten von Christa Wolf. Rüdiger Bernhardt* 96
 P. NUSSER, *Trivalliteratur (Sammlung Metzler, 262). Bo Andersson* 98
 I. KARLSSON, *Landet i mitten. Tyskland och det nya Europa*;
 H. von FRIESEN, *Det nya Tyskland. Gustav Korlén* 100
 G. OREGLIA, *Dante. Liv, verk & samtid. Magnus Röhl* 102
 M. ARRIVE, F. GADET, M. GALMICHE, *La grammaire d'aujourd'hui. Guide alphabétique de linguistique française. Gaëtan Cotard* 104
 S.L. DOLGIN, *La novela desmitificadora española*;
 G. DIAZ MIGOYO, *La diferencia novelesca. Lectura irónica de la ficción*;
 M.D. de ASIS GARROTE, *Última hora de la novela en España. Ken Benson* 107

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DAVID LODGE and MALCOLM BRADBURY

'Laughing Matter': The Comic Novel in English

[Introductory note: This is an abridged and edited version of a talk given by the eminent novelists and critics David Lodge and Malcolm Bradbury at the 1991 Brighton International Festival. The meeting was organised by the Montpellier Society; it was chaired by John Hart, who, for the occasion, had drawn up a list of 250 humorous novels in English; thirty of the best known titles are given at the end of the talk.]

DAVID LODGE:

We tend to think of the novel as a form which arose in England and Europe generally in the 18th century. But there was of course prose fiction long before that going back to classical times, and the novel as we understand it didn't appear out of nowhere. We can trace its sources, we can see the ingredients it was made of and we can look at the prose fiction of the Renaissance period as a kind of stew in which a lot of heterogeneous ingredients were bobbing about in the liquid. Later they began to merge and meld into the novel. Those ingredients would include romance of all kinds: chivalric romance about Knights and the Round Table and so on; pastoral romance; history of the kind that Shakespeare drew on for his history plays; confessions by people who converted or by reformed criminals; letters and journals; satire and parody of various kinds; tales of rogues and scoundrels, particularly a form popular in Spain known as the 'picaresque' tale, and also all the various early manifestations of journalism, which were made possible by the invention of the printing press at that time, like stories about unusual happenings, disasters, freaks and so on.

The most important single work of prose fiction written in that period was undoubtedly *Don Quixote* and I guess everybody knows the story of Don Quixote whether they have read it or not. A down-at-heel gentleman goes crazy through reading too many romances about chivalry about the medieval knights. He imagines he is a knight and he puts on an improvised suit of armour and goes out into what was contemporary Spain and tries to re-enact those stories of chivalry

in real life. He takes with him a sceptical down-to-earth man called Sancho Panza who reluctantly has to play the part of his page. He sets out on a broken-down horse called Rosinante in quest of heroic adventures and everybody knows the first one, which is where he charges a lot of windmills with his lance under the illusion that they are giants and gets lifted into the air and thrown out of his saddle. Shortly afterwards he releases a chain gang of criminals under the impression that they are oppressed people and is beaten up and robbed for his pains. So the story continually proceeds by these farcical episodes in which Don Quixote's chivalric and romantic illusions are shattered by reality. But what's significant about *Don Quixote* is that it uses comedy to show that romance falsifies reality, and the novel as a literary form was, and I think still is, essentially a realistic form, that is it appeals to us because it reflects the world and it makes sense of the world as we know it and experience it.

In England it arose in two very different forms. Out of that rich stew that I talked about, two predominant types of prose fiction emerged in the 18th century. One was the sentimental novel exemplified by the novels of Samuel Richardson — *Pamela* and *Clarissa* published in the 1740's. These novels are now read only by university students of English literature but they were enormously popular in their own day. They are epistolary novels, written in the form of letters, they are enormously long, and they provoked many imitations, perhaps the most well-known today is *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* by Laclos. 'Sentimental' in this context doesn't mean exactly what it means today. It meant detailed analysis of the emotional and moral scruples provoked by crises in personal life, like whom you fall in love with or whom you decide to marry, and so on. *Pamela* is the story of a virtuous maid servant who resists the attempts of her master to seduce her and is rewarded for her virtue by honourable marriage in the end. It's essentially a romantic plot. It is in fact a granddaddy of the Mills and Boon romances of today but it's told in a very realistic, plausible kind of way, full of specific detail drawn from Richardson's observation of contemporary society.

What's interesting about *Pamela* is not only its popularity and the enormous influence that it enjoyed, but the fact that it immediately provoked a comic riposte—a comic counterblast. Not long after *Pamela* was published and was all the rage, a youngish lawyer and playwright called Henry Fielding published a parody of it called *Shamela*. This is a good illustration of the dialectic between serious or sentimental fiction and comic fiction in the English novel tradition.

Fielding, having had some success with that travesty of *Pamela*, then went on to write another sort of parody or, as Richardson called

it, "scandalous engraftment upon *Pamela*." Pamela's name was Andrews, Pamela Andrews, and Fielding wrote a book called *Joseph Andrews* and he made Joseph Andrews Pamela's brother. Joseph is a footman, not a maid servant, whose mistress takes a fancy to him and tries to seduce him. The seduction plot, which is potentially serious and painful, even tragic, in *Pamela*, becomes slightly absurd when a strapping young man is trying to resist the advances of a mature woman and runs away. But this is where the novel really stops being a parody of *Pamela* and becomes something else. And what it becomes is something very like *Don Quixote*. Because Joseph Andrews meets up with a friend called Parson Adams, who is an English variation on Don Quixote, a kind of amiable eccentric. Instead of believing that he is living in the world of chivalry, Parson Adams believes that everybody's naturally good and interprets all their behaviour in the best possible way and therefore is constantly humiliated or abused by his good faith in human nature.

Richardson later wrote a very great novel, much greater than *Pamela*, called *Clarissa*, a tragedy, and Fielding went on to write a much greater novel than *Shamela* or *Joseph Andrews* called *Tom Jones*. But what's interesting is that these two great founding fathers of the English novel were so antithetical, and that in a sense the English novel grew out of a dialogue between the two types of fiction that they represented. From Richardson descends the novel of sensibility, of introspection, of psychological analysis, from Fielding comes the novel of farce, of robust humour, of parody, of adventure on the road. And, as I said, the comic novel begins in the English novel tradition as a critique of the sentimental novel. The comic novel is saying that the sentimental novel, although its technique is superficially realistic, actually falsifies experience because it presents people as obsessively and exclusively concerned with the fine points of emotion and love and morality, and ignores the fact that we are also animals subject to all kinds of low and ignoble needs and desires.

Fielding's novels and Smollett's after them, are full of rather low, vulgar farce to do with chamber pots, eating, excretion, and sexuality, and people getting mixed up in the wrong beds and so on. That's always been a part of the comic novel tradition and it is implicitly saying that the sentimental novel is presenting human nature cut off at the waist. But the very aim of being comic means that the comic novel is never entirely realistic. In its surface presentation of life it needs to arouse laughter, either by comedy of situation, by arranging situations of a rather improbable kind or by using all kinds of stylistic devices, like the mock heroic which Fielding uses, or parody, alluding to another fictional text in the middle of one's own text. All these things tend to demonstrate that the text is a piece of fiction and not a

piece of real life, whereas Richardson's novels were read by many people in their own day as being actual authentic collections of real letters of which Richardson was presumed to be just the editor. It's impossible to read the novels of Fielding, or any comic novelist, without knowing that you're reading a work of fiction. So the comic novel becomes the form that is hospitable to what literary professors call 'metafiction', that is to the whole business of referring to the process of composition while you're actually writing. The cardinal example of that in the 18th century is a novel by Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, which takes the project of a sentimental novel and deconstructs it in a most elaborate way.

Towards the end of the 18th century and in the 19th century these two types of novel, the sentimental novel and the comic novel, begin to converge. You can see it happening in Fanny Burney, for instance, where a heroine-centered love story, which is the main interest, has interludes of comic farce in it. You can see it much more interestingly in Jane Austen where the heroine-centered love story coming down from Richardson's *Pamela* (Jane Austen was a great fan of Richardson), is turned in the direction of comedy. But it is not the Fielding kind of comedy; it is not the *Don Quixote*-robust-farcical-chamber pots-and-bedrooms comedy, it is a much more subtle, sophisticated comedy which I think derives from theatre, from the comedy of manners. The two traditions are beginning to merge in Jane Austen within her small domestic scale. You can say that the sentimental novel and the comic novel are in fact unified, beautifully blended in Jane Austen.

But you also get in the beginning of the 19th century a new type of novel and that's the historical novel of Walter Scott. What's new about that is its political and historical epic scope, the attempt to represent historical processes in fiction, mixing fictional characters with historical ones, having lots of different classes of society, characters in different classes who all interact, and you show the social and historical process in action. That was a new thing and it was very exciting to contemporaries. Scott himself had learned from both the sentimental novel and the comic novel and he incorporated certain elements of them. A novel like *The Heart of Midlothian* has comic characters and there are some farcical incidents that you could trace back to Fielding and Cervantes and there is certainly agonising introspection by some characters in intolerable moral dilemmas, which you could trace back to the sentimental tradition. We think of the great 19th century novels of Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, perhaps going up as far as Hardy, as a new synthesis really based on Scott's formula, but bringing it to bear slightly more contemporary material. What the great classic Victorian novels do is they combine

the panoramic social breadth of Scott with the psychological subtlety and introspection that you get from the sentimental novel tradition and with the kind of rich variety of human behaviour and speech that you get from the comic novel tradition.

The last important point I want to make is that it was the comic novel which democratised prose fiction. Romance was essentially a courtly and upper-class form, it dealt with great nobles—if it dealt with shepherds it made them speak in the same way as nobles. In Sidney's *Arcadia* for instance, all the characters whatever class they are all speak the same language, very courtly, well-formed and literary. Lower-class speech was incorporated in the works of Rabelais and Cervantes, in the broadsides and in the journalism that I spoke of earlier, and it was the comic novel which integrated them into the novel tradition. That variety of voices that we take for granted in the novel, and which is actually its great distinction, is something that comes essentially through the comic rather than the romantic tradition of fiction. So what happens in the Victorian tradition is that the comic novel as such becomes a rather marginal form. You won't find many classic comic novels in the 19th century. The ones that are there are rather minor novels like *Vice Versa* or *Three Men in a Boat*; they are very entertaining and they are good, but they are not the great books, they are not on the same scale as *Tom Jones* or *Tristram Shandy*. Dickens starts out by writing a comic novel, *The Pickwick Papers*, which is in fact following the Quixotic archetype. Pickwick and Sam Weller are reincarnations of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, and there is a series of comic adventures on the road. It is the same archetype coming back. But Dickens very soon grows out of that and begins to write a kind of fiction which is much more serious, which engages with society in the scale that Scott did, and which analyses the strange freaks of human behaviour in the way that Richardson did, but which also has that comic breadth and feeling for comedy and character, for comic eccentricity, a great feature of the English comic novel, and I think that's true also of Thackeray and George Eliot.

In the 20th century the comic novel seems to come back again as a distinct genre of some significance and this may be because there has been a dissolution of that wonderful Victorian synthesis, the classic Victorian novel, through which great writers could address the whole nation. There was no highbrow-lowbrow division of fiction in those days, nor was there a distinction between fiction which is entertaining and fiction which is good for you; because George Eliot and Dickens were both. But that synthesis for various reasons seemed to break up at the end of the 19th century and fiction began

to fragment again into different subgenres, one of which I guess was the comic novel.

MALCOLM BRADBURY:

I think the simplest definition of the comic novel is something that is written in Britain and studied in Germany, and that explains almost everything. The fact of the matter is that there is truly something absurd about the task of trying to define seriously something that seeks the opposite effect. The goal of comic fiction is obviously in some sense, and in some fundamental sense, to amuse. But I say written in Britain with some seriousness because I think the British comic tradition in fiction, which is what David Lodge has been talking about, is actually one of the most fundamentally stable traditions of comic fiction in any culture and it is therefore very interesting to ask the question: Why do the British need to laugh? What is it they are laughing about? And what are they doing with all this humour? Why is there such a superfluity of it when there are so many other important things that they might attend to? One theory might be that the British have humour instead of sex and I think there is a good deal to be said along those lines. But I think the truth is that the British have humour because they have class. That is to say that in a society which has enormous social stratifications, a society in fact in which everybody hates each other like mad, it is necessary to have some oil, something that allows the system—the machine of a social order which is itself eccentric or idiosyncratic—actually to operate, and what allows the British to get on with each other when they hate or perhaps distrust each other so much is that they tell jokes to each other or they humour each other, and this particular operation I think has become structural to the English novel.

There are surely three great comic novelists at the beginning of the British novel tradition, and they are Swift, Sterne and Fielding. Of those three Swift is a miserable sod for whom the very fact of human existence is such a shock, such a disappointing thing. To him the human race is repulsive. By the time he gets to the fourth book of *Gulliver's Travels* all he can do is to stuff his handkerchief up his nose in order to get away from the very smell of humanity. It's a fiction or a literature of disgust or rather a cosmic satire of human absurdity. In *Tristram Shandy* Sterne is inventing the most incredible device for the writing of the comic novel that you could ever think of: he says "I'll go on writing this book until I drop dead". So the way the book ends is actually author dropping dead! This is the first version of Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" in actual practice. So the comedy of this book is that it is a fight against mortality. But Field-

ing is the author of the comic novel as a social machine and the joke of *Tom Jones* is of course the joke of the title, *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*. Why tell a story about somebody called Tom Jones? What is the point of such a story? A person whose origins are not known? A person whose name is nothing? It is the story of a nobody, and the comedy of the book in that case is that because he is a nobody, because he doesn't fit into the class system anywhere, nobody knows who he is, he can be rich or he can be poor, he can be wise or he can be foolish. Everybody has a role for Tom Jones and in fact the plot of the book is the plot that actually Fielding describes in the preface to *Joseph Andrews*.

In this preface Fielding, using neo-classical standards, calls the novel 'A Comic Epic Poem in Prose'. What he means by that is that it is comic because it is not tragic; in fact it is a tragedy turned upside down. Tom Jones gets endlessly into trouble. He is about to be hanged in the middle of the novel but you can't end a comic novel with the hero being hanged, or not usually. So he moves through all sorts of areas of society. He is both a hero and a rogue, he is both a rich man and a poor man, he is both sexually virtuous and sexually corrupt. All of these elements are in his story. The point that I am making is that Fielding is indeed the comic novelist of the British class system; Sterne is a comic novelist who uses humour as a stay against misfortune, or a stay against death, which is what he tells us he is doing in *Tristram Shandy*. He says: "I want to laugh, I want to amuse myself and you because I'm going to die, and therefore this is my protection. The play of the mind is my protection against the dying of the body." And Swift, to put it crudely, is a novelist of disgust with our human lot. And in those three writers in particular, it does seem to me, you have a great many origins for a comic tradition which has been peculiarly strong in Britain and which persists to this day. And almost any comic novel that is written today seems to me to fall into one or other, as it were, of the Fielding, Swift or Sterne models.

In 20th century British comic fiction there are two traditions: E.M. Forster, social comedy, Fielding-like comedy on the one hand, and then anti-comedy or black comedy with Evelyn Waugh, Aldous Huxley, Muriel Spark and all the sort of wicked, mischievous writers of comedy who shade over into darkness and who are closer to the Sterne and the Swift tradition. Kingsley Amis is, I think, essentially in the tradition of Fielding, Forster and social and moral comedy, which goes dark in his later years as he discovers that women are not as attractive as he thought. The other tradition, the mischievous tradition, the dark tradition, is indeed the work of people like Muriel Spark whose best novel (all her books are really comedies about death)

is, I think, *The Driver's Seat*. This is the story of a woman who knows the novelist is plotting to kill her at the end of the novel and therefore decides to write her own contract and actually succeeds in arranging her own death on her own terms by quarrelling conspicuously with the author of the book. In other words, if the author's going to be God and kill me, I'm going to be a human being and fight back, and I am going to die, but not like you said in the first place. This is the tradition of black comedy, and I must admit that my own fiction has always oscillated between these two traditions, so that my great heroes are on the one hand E.M. Forster and on the other hand Evelyn Waugh, who is actually the best 20th century British comic novelist whatever anybody thinks about his politics, and the finest and most delightful 20th century comic novel is *Decline and Fall*. In the course of this novel there is a deeply fascinating satire of English life in all its contradictions, all those matters of class, all those conflicts of tradition and modernity that belong to English society, told in a 20th century manner by refusing, and in a sense refuting, the one thing that any serious modernist was absolutely obsessed by at the beginning of the 20th century and that is interior consciousness, 'the interior monologue'. There is no interior consciousness in Waugh. So it's a world spectacularly about life from the outside, it's a world about human beings, or as Evelyn Waugh says, machines. The idea is that when something, some aspect of life, which is normally seen as human and humane and rationalised, is presented as an absurdity, or a farce or a machine, then it does become funny. And of course that's what Tom Sharpe does too. Tom Sharpe is in that tradition, and that's why I think he is one of the great contemporary farce writers in the tradition of Waugh.

There is almost no comedy in American fiction in the 19th century except for the work of Mark Twain. American writers actually did follow the Richardson tradition, the romance tradition, and the gothic tradition of the novel took over fiction almost entirely in America in the 19th century. If you read the works of James Fenimore Cooper, you won't find any laughs at all. If you read *Moby Dick* you may snigger once or twice about the problems of whales, (that's whales with an H), but on the whole you will not go for its humour. If, on the other hand you read Twain, who is actually, as Ernest Hemingway said, the inventor of the modern American novel, you will discover a sensibility so anarchic, so mischievously constructed against the idea of social order and culture, and one of the greatest comic novels ever written is of course *Huckleberry Finn*. The humour of *Huckleberry Finn* is essentially the humour of somebody who does not understand why we have culture. What's it for? In other words he lives in the world of nature and observes the world of culture.

In 1960 the comic tradition in America really began to flower when two great traditions of American humour began to merge. One is the Jewish American tradition, the tradition that is represented in the novel by Saul Bellow, whom I insist on seeing as a comic writer, Bernard Malamud, Phillip Roth and, the funniest of all, Stanley Elkin. Elkin is not very much read in Britain but he is an absolutely splendid American Jewish writer. That tradition crosses over with, or acquaints itself with, the tradition of black humour which is also extremely important in an America fascinated by the world of anxious existential dismay. The absurdist perception is exemplified by Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, the funniest existential novel ever written. It's a novel about war as meaninglessness, about life as meaninglessness. 'Catch 22' itself is a condition. You'll remember that it's the American Air Force's presumption that, if you refuse to go on a mission, you're sane but, if you're sane, that is no excuse for not going on a mission so you're endlessly recycled up in the air.

I just wish to mention one other book, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a book of what Vonnegut calls 'gallows humour' and it does seem to me that the American tradition from about the 1960's has centralised humour and comedy to the point where almost every major American novel of recent years, with the exception of Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is funny. And I think this has been happening in recent British fiction as well.

So essentially I think what both David and I are saying is that, at the beginning of the novel tradition the option of the comic was fundamental. In the 19th century, and this is even more true in America than it is true in Britain, it begins to die or to fade because romance and sentimentality dominate. In the 20th century, as we see our position, our human position, as more absurd, more ridiculous, more mechanical, more exposed, we begin to return to the comic again.

Thirty humorous novels in English:

- Henry Fielding, *The Adventures of Joseph Andrews*, 1742
- Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, 1767
- Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, 1844
- Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1884
- J.K. Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, 1889
- George & Weedon Grossmith, *Diary of a Nobody*, 1892
- H.G. Wells, *The History of Mr Polly*, 1910
- Evelyn Waugh, *Decline and Fall*, 1928
- Stella Gibbons, *Cold Comfort Farm*, 1932
- E.F. Benson, *Mapp and Lucia*, 1935
- Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 1939
- Nancy Mitford, *The Pursuit of Love*, 1945
- P.G. Woodhouse, *Joy in the Morning*, 1947
- Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim*, 1954
- Peter De Vries, *Reuben, Reuben*, 1956

10 David Lodge and Malcolm Bradbury

H.E. Bates, *The Darling Buds of May*, 1958
Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*, 1961
Michael Frayn, *Towards the End of the Morning*, 1967
George MacDonald Fraser, *Flashman*, 1970
Tom Sharpe, *Porterhouse Blue*, 1974
Leslie Thomas, *Tropic of Ruislip*, 1974
Malcolm Bradbury, *The History Man*, 1975
David Lodge, *Changing Places*, 1975
Douglas Adams, *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, 1979
Stanley Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 1983
Howard Jacobson, *Coming from Behind*, 1983
David Nobbs, *Second from Last in the Sack Race*, 1983
Sue Townsend, *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13 3/4*, 1983
Garrison Keillor, *Lake Wobegone Days*, 1985
Terry Pratchett, *Guards! Guards!*, 1989

List compiled by John Hart, himself the author of a comic novel: *Jizz*, 1992

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ANNE MARIE BÜLOW-MØLLER

Text Linguistics at Work

Anne Marie Bülow-Møller undervisar i engelska vid den fackspråkliga fakulteten vid Handelshögskolan i Köpenhamn. Hon har doktorsexamen med inriktning på *linguistic criticism* från University of East Anglia (UK). 1989 publicerade hon *The Textlinguistic Omnibus*, en pedagogiskt inriktad översikt över textlingvistisk metod. Här presenterar hon ett urval pedagogiskt relevanta textlingvistiska kategorier.

Text linguistic methods have something to offer those that work with and teach text analysis—both for literary and non-literary texts.

The term text linguistics is used, not very systematically, to cover several kinds of analysis dealing with units larger than the sentence. This means that the field of text linguistics now caters for much that used to be found under grammar, stylistics, rhetoric etc. For text analysis, this is ideal, as the over-all impression of a text is of course made up of all these categories.

In the following, I shall present a selection of categories that I have found useful in teaching text analysis. There is no attempt to cover even the most important text linguistic methods in a systematic way (I have done so elsewhere, in Bülow-Møller, 1989), so the observations here represent no more than a supplement of linguistic features that may not strike the eye immediately. The categories are, however, selected within the main subareas, which for the present purpose have been grouped as **semantic choice, syntactic transformation, cohesion, presupposition and pragmatic expectation.**

1. Language as choice between options

Speakers (a term that covers writers below) reveal much about themselves in their selection of lexis and syntax; this goes not only for gender, education etc., but also for their norms and standards and interests. Where this process is replicated in literature, a character assumes an individual 'voice' through the use of those same linguistic features. In "linguistic criticism", this is called a 'mind style' (see e.g. Fowler, 1986, Leech and Short, 1981, Peer, 1988). To illustrate the categories I have chosen, I shall quote the 'voice' of Muriel Spark's young girl Lorna, whose monologue makes up the short story "You should have seen the mess", to show how a few symptomatic linguistic choices help to create a character.

1.1: Lexical choice

In the field of semantics, I find that students are adept at picking up the phenomenon of over- and underlexicalisation, where a speaker's choice of terms demonstrates detailed knowledge or ignorance of a