An Analysis of Poetic Referent from the Perspective of Philosophy of Language

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Abstract: *The development of contemporary Western poetics exhibits two notable characteristics: the linguistic turn and the integration with other disciplines, particularly philosophy. Language, referent, and meaning have emerged as crucial and even central aspects that demand attention in poetic theory. This article examines poetry through the lens of philosophy of language, reflecting on the perspectives of analytical philosophers such as Frege, Wittgenstein, and Searle regarding literary referent. It explores the various forms of poetic referent and demonstrates its non-objective, intricate, and diverse nature. Furthermore, this article extends the discourse to investigate the semantic trajectory of poetic language. Its objective is to illustrate that analytical philosophy furnishes a foundation and point of reference for the study of poetic referent. However, given the diversity of poetic referent and the elusiveness of meaning, the exploration of poetic referent necessitates surpassing the confines of analytical philosophy, which tends to objectify and pursue the truth value of meaning. Poetry articulates the truth of existence and the significance of life in a distinctive manner, offering us guidance and inspiration by transcending this analytical framework.*

Keywords: philosophy of language, poetry, referent, meaning

1. Language, Poetry and Referent

The linguistic turn represents a pivotal moment in the history of human thought, providing a "historical opportunity" for understanding the connection between literary theory and literary phenomena. This turn extends beyond the realm of philosophy and holds significant historical significance. Ken Hirschkop argues that scholars have often failed to examine these turns collectively because they have not recognized the period from 1890 to 1950 as a historical moment characterized by linguistic turns. Instead, it has been commonly understood as "the linguistic turn" singularly executed in philosophy. [1]However, the linguistic turn has had a profound impact on literature and art, particularly in terms of the primacy of thought, meaning, and referent. Analytical philosophy, with its emphasis on language, the priority of language in thought, and the role of linguistic analysis, has sparked discussions in analytic aesthetics and Western literary theory on topics such as meaning, referent, fiction, possible worlds, and speech acts. As a result, it has brought about a transformation in the epistemology of literary theory.[2]

In the realm of poetry, discussions surrounding "language," "referent," and "meaning" have garnered significant attention. Poetry, as an art form, is intricately connected to language. Aristotle defines poetics as both the "art of making" and the "art of imitation." In the medieval period, poetics primarily encompassed the norms of poetic creation. However, since Goethe, the scope of poetry has expanded to encompass the study of folk literature and prose genres. This article specifically focuses on the broader sense of poetry, commonly referred to as literature, rather than being confined to the genre of poetry.

Analytical philosophy serves as a valuable philosophical foundation for exploring the concept of referent in poetry (literature). By adopting a perspective rooted in the philosophy of language, we can reflect on the existence of referent in poetry and engage in relevant discussions. However, it is important to recognize that the referent of literary language is both an integral part of language and transcends the limitations imposed by language itself. This realization calls for a broader perspective that goes beyond the confines of analytical philosophy in order to examine the issue of referent in poetry and the semantic trajectory of poetic language. The viewpoint of the Prague School, which emphasizes the interplay between the function and structure of language, can provide valuable insights into the issue of poetic referent. Furthermore, postmodernist poetics offers fresh perspectives on the matter. By exploring and applying these philosophical and poetic theories, we can gain a deeper

understanding of how poetic language refers and appreciate the intricate and diverse nature of referent in poetic language. This, in turn, enriches the complexity and depth of literary works and expands their potential for meaning.

2. Reflection on the Foundation of Poetic Referent

Gottlob Frege, a renowned German philosopher and a key figure in the development of analytic philosophy, made a significant distinction between the meaning and reference of language in his influential work "Sense and Reference." In this work, Frege posits that the referents of language in everyday usage possess characteristics of objectivity and objectification. He argues that when words are used in their ordinary manner, one intends to refer to their specific objects. Frege explains this concept by stating, "It is clear from the context that by "sign" and "name" I have here understood any designation representing a proper name, whose referent is thus a definite object." [3]

This distinction made by Frege sheds light on the relationship between language and its referential function, providing a framework for understanding the connection between words and the objects they denote.

Regarding the reference of poetry, Frege's view is that if there is doubt about whether a name in a poetic sentence has a referent, then it is also doubtful whether the entire sentence has a referent. For example, in the sentence "Odysseus was set ashore at Ithaca while sound asleep," Frege suggests that the referent of the name "Odysseus" is uncertain, and as a result, the entire sentence may not have a referent. This uncertainty about the referent of poetic language can lead to a loss of value for the thought expressed in the sentence. In such cases, Frege suggests that we can accept the truth value of the sentence as its referent, rather than a specific object or referent. This idea highlights the complex nature of poetic language and the challenges involved in defining its referential function.

Indeed, many scholars have interpreted Frege's passage as evidence that reference, according to him, is objective and determinate.This has led some scholars to conclude that analytic philosophy denies the referential nature of literary language, as it suggests that poetic language lacks referent.[4]

However, this article argues that Frege's research on reference actually provides a foundation for studying poetic reference. While it is true that Frege emphasizes objectivity and determinacy in reference, he also acknowledges exceptional cases where one may wish to discuss the words themselves or their sense. In these exceptional cases, meaning arises from the use of phrases like "the sense of the expression 'A'" or what can be referred to as "indirect referents." Therefore, rather than denying the referential nature of literary language, Frege's research on reference allows for the exploration of indirect referents and the study of poetic reference. It provides a framework to understand how meaning can be derived from language that may not have a direct and determinate referent, expanding the possibilities for analyzing the referential complexity of poetic language.

Overall, Frege's exploration of referent and sense offers valuable insights. The referent refers to the objective entities themselves, while literature may lack objective referentiality but possesses a sense. However, there are cases where people can discuss words themselves or their meanings using "indirect referents." Sense is an expression of truth value derived from objectively referential entities and constitutes the objective content of thought. Our pursuit of truth drives us to constantly transition from meaning to referential objects. In other words, these exceptional cases of "indirect referents" open up possibilities for investigating poetic reference. Nonetheless, delving into the realm of poetic expression, which is rooted in the notion that art originates from life but transcends it, requires moving beyond the pursuit of referential meaning and its truth value.

Wittgenstein critically engaged with and reflected upon Frege's ideas, asserting that Frege placed excessive emphasis on the logical structure of language and the true value of referent, while neglecting the actual context of language use and the rules of communication. According to Wittgenstein, the meaning of language is established through the rules and conventions of usage and communication, rather than through direct reference. As he stated, "I use the name 'N' without a fixed meaning" [5]. In his later philosophy, Wittgenstein introduced the concept of "language games," which refers to words or expressions that are widely employed within specific linguistic contexts. A language game does not necessarily denote a particular real object, but rather functions as a symbol with shared meaning within a specific context. Different language games can possess distinct rules and conventions, each contributing to its own unique meaning.

Similarly, Searle's theory of reference emphasizes the intention and purpose behind language use.

According to Searle, language reference is achieved through the intention and purpose of speech acts. In his analysis of literary texts, Searle describes the creation of fictional characters and events through reference as a "pretended" process. He explains that it is this pretended reference that brings fictional characters to life, and it is through shared pretense that we are able to discuss these characters, as exemplified in the passage about Sherlock Holmes. [6]In the realm of fictional discourse, the pretended reference is established through the author's conscious performance of speech acts, rather than through actual performance. This concept of pretended reference allows authors to use literal words in fictional discourse without assuming associated real-world obligations. Fictional statements possess a dual adaptability: they are designed to fit within fictional worlds while also aligning with our beliefs and understanding of reality.

The framework of analytic philosophy, while primarily focused on verifiability, also offers a basis for examining poetic reference. Frege's concept of "indirect referent" suggests that certain language in poetry does not directly refer to objects, but rather explores words themselves or their meanings. Wittgenstein's theory of "language games" underscores the significance of the social and cultural context in shaping and comprehending meaning. Searle's theory of "pretended reference" proposes that reference in poetry does not always necessitate a direct correspondence with real-world objects, but can involve fictional or pretended reference. The study of poetic reference and meaning goes beyond the objective description of the real world, taking into account the fictionality and imagination inherent in poetry. These reflections demonstrate that analytic philosophy, on one hand, provides a foundation and reference point for investigating poetic reference. However, on the other hand, delving into the poetic referent and the path of poetic expression requires transcending the pursuit of truth value conditions associated with reference.

3. The diversification of poetic referent

If we cautiously acknowledge the existence of reference in poetic language, given its unverifiability and disguisement, we can identify specific characteristics that reference in poetry exhibits. The referential function of literary language is both a constituent of language and surpasses the limitations inherent in language itself. Literary language is distinguished by its use of imagery, encompassing a range of emotions and imaginative elements that are detached from the practical purposes of everyday life. Consequently, it becomes necessary for us to expand our perspective beyond the confines of analytic philosophy and explore the question of reference in poetry from a broader standpoint.

According to the Prague School, the social function of language can be categorized into communicative and poetic functions, based on the relationship between language and external reality. The communicative function is prominent when language prioritizes informational content, while the poetic function is highlighted when language emphasizes its own form.[7]Building on the Prague School's functional research, Jacobson argues that there are six factors in verbal communication that correspond to six functions, including referential and poetic functions. [8] He contends that the referential function is emphasized when communication is contextually oriented, whereas the poetic function is highlighted when communication focuses on the information itself. The poetic function deepens the inherent opposition between the sign and the object (the referent) by accentuating the perceptibility of the sign itself. It embodies the non-objectivity and non-objectification of the poetic function. Mukarovsky also emphasizes the central role of the sign in poetic language, stating, "In the language of poetry, our attention is always directed towards the sign itself"[9].

In conclusion, the expressions of Frege's "discussion of words themselves," the Prague School's "self-form," and Jakobson and Mukarovsky's "poetic reference to the sign itself" suggest that poetry possesses a self-referential quality, referring to its own language and form. Through its language and formal features, poetry expresses and explores its own nature and meaning. According to Slinn, W. (1999), reference is not something that exists prior to language but is instead an effect of a speech act that changes reality by producing the referent through language. [10] states that language speaks and brings itself to language, expressing itself through our experience of language. Poetry distinguishes itself from other literary forms by its self-referential characteristics, which endow it with unique artistic and meaningful qualities. Through self-reference and reflection, poetry can explore the limits and possibilities of language, challenge traditional modes of expression, and create new aesthetic experiences and layers of meaning. As [11] aptly puts it, "The meaning of a poem is in, and only in, the language."

Are there other forms of reference in poetry aside from self-referentiality? Jakobson argues that

language itself is multifunctional, and while the poetic function is a dominant function of literary language, it is not the only function. Therefore, when examining poetry linguistically, it is necessary to go beyond the self-referential function and consider other forms of reference. According to Canadian scholar [12], references in literary texts encompass self-reference, inter-textual reference, external reference, and what she terms "interpretive reference." External reference in poetry involves presenting facts and tracing events through the text, representing the objective and object-oriented aspect of poetic language. On the other hand, intra-textual reference is a form of reference that relates to external reference and is achieved by establishing a coherent and unified fictional narrative framework. Riffaterre suggests that literary reference often takes an inter-textual form, stating that "Poetic discourse is built on the balance between words and texts, or texts and other texts"[13]. This inter-textual reference breaks away from the closed and static nature of structuralism, creating a textual space between the writing subject, the reader, and the external text (context), thus presenting the text as a dynamic process[14].

Due to space constraints, it is not possible to delve into the extensive connotations and extensions of poetic referent explored in various interdisciplinary fields. However, it is evident that the complexity of poetic reference is determined by the ambiguity and intricacy of linguistic connotation and extension within the potential poetic world. Literary reference intersects and overlaps with other forms of reference, with no strict differentiation between external reference, internal reference, self-reference, and inter-textual reference. As Searle describes "pretended reference," fictional narratives adapt to both the fictional world and our beliefs and understanding of reality. Authors employ "pretense reference" to create unique fictional worlds with distinct rules and conditions, corresponding to the notion of "internal reference." While fictional works are imaginary, they often resonate with readers and evoke comprehension through their connection and contrast with the real world, encompassing the concept of "external reference." By employing literal language and descriptions, authors can address emotional, moral, and philosophical issues in relation to the real world within their fictional works, stimulating readers' contemplation and reflection. This also represents an expression of "inter-textual" reference. Therefore, this section primarily explores the diverse referents in poetry. The use of "self-reference," a non-objectified and non-objective reference, deepens the inherent dichotomy between symbol and object, rendering poetry a form of self-aware art. Additionally, the intricate and varied nature of poetic language forms a network of meaning, enabling poetry to uniquely express and convey emotions, thoughts, and aesthetics.

4. Semantic Paths of Poetic Referent

Traditionally, language has been regarded as a tool for communication and expression, allowing individuals to manipulate, possess, create, and employ it. In analytical philosophy, a common approach is to determine the connotation and extension of individual terms based on the truth value conditions of statements. In this context, referent refers to the meaning of an expression being equivalent to the object it denotes. However, when confronted with poetic language, it enters the realm of ambiguity and the "unspeakable," as "poetic words are deliberately chosen to resist this transparency. The difficulty or obscurity of poetry often arises from the intentional introduction of a linguistic filter that isolates the connection between thought and the world" [15]. Nonetheless, while such expressions may deepen the opacity of language, they also constitute the allure of poetic language, giving rise to numerous potential references and semantic pathways within poetic discourse. This, in turn, enhances the complexity and profundity of the work, expanding its meaning.

"Imagining a language means imagining a form of life," a renowned quote by Wittgenstein, serves as a reminder that, prior to delving into individual referents in poetic language, we must envision the poetic world as a potential realm, transcending the real world with its own independent existence. Only then can we grasp the relationship between the semantic connotation and extension of poetic language. The distinctiveness and fundamental nature of poetic language reside in the interplay between linguistic meaning and textual reference, surpassing not only reality but also the semantic truth value conditions of analytical philosophy. It becomes a means for individuals to understand themselves and transcend their limitations.

Poetic language lacks a strict differentiation of reference, and the network formed by diverse references deviates from the semantic coding pattern commonly employed in analytical philosophy, resulting in the phenomenon of reference polysemy. Through such creativity and imagination, poetry surpasses mere direct depiction, with readers' subjective experiences and personal associations playing a vital role in interpreting and comprehending the poetry. This dynamic highlights the intricate

relationship between language, meaning, and aesthetic experience in poetry, showcasing its distinctive artistic value.

Moreover, poetry's self-referentiality possesses an inherent authenticity, as it explores the realm of non-objective thinking delving into the truth of existence, the world, and the meaning of life. Heidegger argued that the task of thought is to abandon prior thoughts and determine what is thought. In his exploration of thought, Heidegger developed a system of "poetic philosophy," also known as "non-metaphysical thought" [16]. Heidegger's "poetic philosophy" challenges the prevailing scientific and technological mode of thinking, which tends to objectify and commodify everything, treating them as mere "objects" or "subjects" [17]. It reminds us that not all forms of thinking and language are representations of objective entities; thinking and language never become objectified. The non-objectivity of poetic referents allows poetry to transcend the limitations of the real world and create an independent language world. Poetic language goes beyond mere depiction and description of objective things; it becomes a means of expressing subjective emotions and thoughts. The authenticity of poetry lies in its ability to express human emotions, thoughts, and imagination in a non-objective manner, surpassing the constraints of everyday language and giving rise to a unique language aesthetic.

5. Conclusions

This article aims to demonstrate how analytic philosophy serves as a foundation and reference for the study of poetic referent. The language of poetry, with its diverse modes of reference and non-objectivity, complexity, and variety of referential characteristics, offers multiple possibilities for reference and avenues of meaning in poetic language. This enhances the complexity and depth of literary works, expanding their significance. Moreover, the diversity of poetic reference and the ambiguity of meaning go beyond the limitations of objectifying and objectified literary reference in analytic philosophy, as well as its pursuit of truth values. This creates paths of meaning that transcend artistry and authenticity. Poetic philosophy may not necessarily seek definitive truths or provide knowledge, but it opens up new avenues for thought, breaking free from the confines of objectifying and logical thinking frameworks. It engages with the truth of existence, the truth of the discursive world, and the meaning of life, offering guidance and inspiration.

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