

A Study of Unreliable Narration in *The Remains of the Day*

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Abstract: Unreliable narration as a major narrative method plays a significant role in modern narratology. This paper will make a study of unreliable narration with stylistics in Kazuo Ishiguro's famous work *The Remains of the Day*, which won the Booker Prize in 1989. From the perspective of language itself, including three aspects, ambiguous words, double negatives, and parentheses.

Keywords: Unreliable narration; *The Remains of the Day*; Narratology; Stylistics; Rhetoric

1. Introduction

The study of literature could be conducted from many aspects, including stylistics, rhetoric, narratology, etc. No matter what their research object and purpose are, they all play an important role in the study of literature. *The Remains of the Day* (1989) is one of the most representative works of Kazuo Ishiguro who won the Nobel Prize in 2017. Based on its text, with the combination of the study of stylistics, this paper will study the unreliable narration which is first proposed in rhetoric and also belongs to narratology.

2. Literature Review

Based on the research findings from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the previous studies both on unreliable narration and on *The Remains of the Day* are summarized in this section to support this study.

According to these research findings from CNKI, it could be summarized that unreliable narration has already been studied both at home and abroad, and the number of previous studies on unreliable narration is gradually increasing within these years. Most of the studies of unreliable narration are based on novels, films, or documentaries, including Kazuo Ishiguro's other novels, but there are lacking recent studies on unreliable narration based on *The Remains of the Day*. With the combination of stylistics, some of these studies are much more profound compared with those studies only from the perspective of narratology itself.

The number of previous studies on *The Remains of the Day* is also reflected in a growing tendency. In recent years, some scholars applied pragmatic identity theory, space narrative theory, trauma theory, the interpretation of spiritual ecology, etc. to conduct the study of *The Remains of the Day* or study a single theme of it, like Stevens' identity construction, nostalgia in the novel, the role of collective memory, three characteristics of the narrative style, etc.

It is necessary to mention that there are studies on *The Remains of the Day* from stylistics or unreliable narration of *The Remains of the Day*. However, these studies didn't provide a clear focus on unreliable narration with the English language itself from the perspective of stylistics, and there is no recent study of this type within four years. Besides, in the findings of the study of *The Remains of the Day*, at least in recent years, there are only several papers that studied the narrative style, and only mentioned the unreliable narration from the perspective of narratology. Thus, this paper, a new trial on it, is going to study the unreliable narration in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* from the perspective of stylistics, specifically, the English language itself, including three aspects, the ambiguous words, the double negatives, and the parentheses.

3. Theoretical Framework

The concept of “unreliable narration” originated from the book *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) by American literary critic Wayne Booth. In the book, he said, “For lack of better terms, I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms), unreliable when he does not.^[1]” It is apparent that an unreliable narrator doesn’t speak for or act in accordance with the norms of the work. Then, what is an implied author? As Booth said, “The implied author (the author’s ‘second self’)...This implied author is always distinct from the “real man” – whatever we may take him to be – who creates a superior version of himself, a ‘second self,’ as he creates his work.^[1]” In other words, the real author creates his work, and there is a “second self” in this work, which is the implied author^[2]. Therefore, an unreliable narrator disobeys the norms made by the implied author created by the real author. Then, how do the readers find a narrator disobeys these norms?

Shen Dan, the professor at the School of Foreign Languages of Peking University, pointed out that “No matter what situation, readers need to perform the ‘double decoding’ when reading: one is to interpret the narrator’s words, and the other is to depart from or transcend the narrator’s words to infer the true colors of things or infer what constitutes the correct judgment.^[3]” Readers need to interpret the narrator’s words first when they read a text, and this process is finished by the language itself from the stylistics. Just as Shen Dan said in her book, *Narratology and the Stylistics of Fiction* (1998), “There are at least two overlaps between the ‘discourse’ of narratology and the ‘style’ of stylistics: one is the ‘point of view’ of the narrative and the other is the different forms of discourse that are used by figures in the novel.^[4]” This “point of view” is usually presented by the operation of language level, and the different forms of discourse are also realized by the language. Thus, it is obvious that these two overlaps depend on the language itself, which is presented by the style of the language.

Actually, the implied author, i.e. the second self sets a series of norms under the manipulation of the real author who created them. A reliable narrator follows the norms set by the implied author in speaking or acting in the novel, which is mainly reflected in the text. The real author manipulates the narrator to disobey the rules by deliberately hiding or blurring the facts set by the implied author, and this process is realized by the language that the real author used. The real author manipulates the narrator to become unreliable through language. The real author will inform the readers by using the narrator to speak or act on what the author wants the readers to see. Normally, during the reading, the readers first understand the meaning of it, and then connect it within the context to construct the whole picture in the mind. It is hard to find whether the narrator is reliable or not, but, with the analysis of stylistics, some unreasonable language styles to make the narrator unreliable could still be noticed.

Shen Dan summarized three levels of the analysis of literary stylistics, including the language features, the psychological effects caused by the language features, and the thematic meaning and aesthetic meaning based on language features within the specific context with the aid of psychological effects caused by it^[4]. In the three levels, there is a sequence between them, and the language features are the most basic among them. The language features caused the psychological effects, which means that by using some method dealing with language, the unreliable narrator could seem reliable, but some clues could still be found in the language. Although a specific language feature would produce a specific psychological effect, different people have different views to interpret its meaning based on their different stand. Therefore, sensitive readers could still find the unreasonable language features spoken by the unreliable narrator.

The specific language features caused the specific psychological effects, and the real author would manipulate the narrator to speak or act in the novel to achieve specific psychological effects. What kinds of language features would the narrator use? The readers could connect the situation with the case in daily life. In daily conversations, words with the meaning of uncertainty, vagueness, and unclarity would make people feel a sense of unreliability. Thus, this is one kind of criteria to identify an unreliable narrator. Also, the utterance of a person is contradictory with his own thought, i.e. a person has the wrong memory or makes his own word indirectly with hesitation would hard to make people believe or trust this person. Last but not least, the sentence frequently broke by the disfluency pause for the narrator’s mind is in a mess, or deliberately making up a story or lying to other people. The stylistics of different writers and different works are different. What kind of language is the unreliable narrator used for deceiving the readers in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*? This paper will make a study of the “unreliable narration” with the stylistics from three aspects, the ambiguous words, the double negatives, and the parentheses with the method of close reading.

4. Analysis of Unreliable Narration in *The Remains of the Day* from Stylistics

The language features in *The Remains of the Day* have their unique style, and this style is of great importance in constructing unreliable narration. According to the findings of close reading, three reduplicated language features are used by the author, including ambiguous words, double negatives, and parentheses.

4.1. Ambiguous Words in the Narrative

The ambiguous words easily cause confusion, for these words can be understood in more than one way, which usually express indeterminate, unclear, and contradictory meanings. Even in daily life, if we met a person speaking like this, things would be going crazy. Generally, many language features are used for identifying unreliable narration in stylistics. Specifically, two kinds of signals are used for identifying unreliable narration in *The Remains of the Day*. One is the words with the meaning of ambiguity, contradiction, and indeterminacy, and the other is the ambiguous reference.

4.1.1. Ambiguous, Contradictory, and Indeterminate Words

As the protagonist of *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens is the narrator of the whole story. However, his narrative often makes readers confused.

Example 1:

It seems increasingly likely that I really will undertake the expedition that has been preoccupying my imagination now for some days^[5].

For example, in the first sentence of the opening paragraph, Kazuo Ishiguro seems to manipulate Stevens by applying a variety of words with uncertainty to inform readers that he is unreliable. As a non-notional verb, specifically, the linking verb, the second word “seem” in the main sentence means “to give the impression of being or doing something; used to make what you say about your thoughts, feelings or actions less strong; used to suggest that something is true when you are not certain or when you want to be polite” directly weakens the certainty of the whole sentence, giving the reader a sense of erraticness. Followed by an adverb “increasingly” and an adjective “likely”, the former means “gradually growing”, while the latter means “possible or probable”, and these two words make the uncertainty of the sentence harder and stronger. In addition, the nouns “expedition” and “imagination” contain much more uncertainty, for the former refers to “an organized journey with a particular purpose, especially to find out about a place is not well known”, while the latter refers to “something that you have imagined rather than something that exists”.

Being the opening sentence of the whole novel, Ishiguro informs people that as a narrator, Stevens is unreliable by manipulating his language via these words with the meaning of uncertainty. In the meantime, Ishiguro deliberately uses “really will” to let the readers believe the narrator. These are contradictory to each other, but it is this contradiction that makes an unreliable narration by the narrator under the manipulation of the real author. Example 1 is typical for identifying the unreliable narration in the text, whether it is a noun, a link-verb, an adverb, or an adjective, and once it gives people an erratic and vague feeling, it could be the evidence of unreliable narration.

4.1.2. Ambiguous Reference

In the novel, another signal for identifying the unreliable narration is the ambiguous reference in Stevens’ narrative, and this is usually proved by personal pronouns. These pronouns have no specific reference, i.e. there is no context to let readers know to whom these personal pronouns refer.

Example 2:

One is simply accepting an inescapable truth: that the likes of **you and I** will never be in a position to comprehend the great affairs of today’s world, and our best course will always be to put our trust in an employer we judge to be wise and honourable, and to devote our energies to the task of serving him to the best of our ability^[5].

Example 3:

The hard reality is, surely, that for the likes of **you and me**, 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 me** at least try to

make a small contribution count for something true and worthy^[5].

In examples 2 and 3, the pronouns like “you and I” or “you and me” in Stevens’ narrative appear at a high frequency. However, it is difficult to find out to whom the personal pronoun “you” refers. These pronouns cause the reader’s confusion, and this is just a way of unreliable narration. Possibly, Stevens uses “you and I” to make the readers trust him. In daily life, like in a conversation, people usually say “you and I” or “you and me” in two different kinds of situations. First, making the relationship between the two parties close. Second, making a comparison between the two parties. Ishiguro uses this ambiguous reference, specifically, the personal pronouns to make the narrator persuade the readers that he is reliable, but actually, not.

4.2. *Unnecessary Double Negatives in the Narrative*

In *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens’ narrative sentences have the features of complexity, for he always uses long sentences to speak or act but actually contain less information. This is one of his biggest characteristics presented in language. These long sentences have one feature which is the reduplicated double negatives. In some way, double negatives could be viewed as negative twice in an utterance, and it has the function of emphasis. However, reduplicated double negatives used in the narrative are not hard to cause suspicion from the readers.

Example 4:

I have myself devised many staff plans over the years, and I do **not believe I am being unduly** boastful if I say that very **few ever** needed amendment^[5].

Example 5:

There was **no reason to believe he would not be** as enthusiastic as before about my proposed motoring trip – indeed, that he would not repeat his most kind offer to ‘foot the bill for the gas’^[5].

Example 6:

Not only was I unable to be certain of Miss Kenton’s desire to rejoin the staff here, **I had not**, of course, even discussed the question of additional staff with Mr Farraday since that first preliminary meeting over a year ago^[5].

Example 7:

So then, there seems **little reason why I should not undertake** my motoring trip to the West Country. I would of course have to write to Miss Kenton to tell her I might be passing by; I would also need to see to the matter of the costumes. Various other questions concerning arrangements here in the house during my absence will need to be settled. But all in all, I can see **no genuine reason why I should not undertake** this trip^[5].

Example 8:

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’^[5].

In example 8, Stevens doesn’t express his views directly, but uses the double negative, “not be unjustified”. The readers would feel the sentence is redundant for it apparently could be written as “justified”. Some scholars distinguish a variety of categories of double negatives^[6]. One of them is called “euphemistic” double negatives, which makes the overall meaning expression tend to be indirect and euphemistic. Liu Jingyi summarized that the structures of double negatives like “not+un-” or “not+in-” are an expression of euphemism^[7]. In daily life, if people speak or act in contradiction with their own thoughts, i.e. these people have the wrong memory or speak their own words indirectly with hesitation, this usually causes chaos in utterance, which would hard to make people believe or trust this person. Ishiguro manipulates Stevens to frequently use double negatives in the narrative possibly to remind the readers that Stevens’ memory or he is deliberately hiding something, and this is the unreliable narration.

From examples 4 to 8, it could be seen that there are many double negatives in Stevens’ narrative. As the real author, Kazuo Ishiguro manipulates the narrator, the protagonist Stevens, to speak in this indirect way to inform the readers that Stevens is unreliable. The double negatives are very easy to draw attention from the readers, especially the one that is unnecessary, and the readers possibly would

be confused by these expressions. However, once the readers find the reason why the narrator narrates like this, they will be shocked by Ishiguro's writing techniques of unreliable narration.

4.3. Numerous Parentheses in the Narrative

Kazuo Ishiguro manipulates Stevens to use a lot of parentheses in his narrative, and this is not very nice for readers, for the reading thoughts are constantly interrupted by these parentheses, and this is a little annoying. However, Ishiguro is reminding the readers that Stevens is unreliable. There are two main kinds of parentheses in Stevens' narrative, the "point out" and the punctuation mark "-".

4.3.1. Point out

Example 9:

At the same time, it is only fair to **point out** that my task in this instance had been of an unusually difficult order^[5].

Example 10:

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^[5].

These two sentences are separated by the "point out" added to the sentence, and this is one kind of parentheses in Stevens' narrative.

4.3.2. Parentheses with the Dash "-" of Punctuation Mark

Example 11:

These were – **I recollect it clearly** – his lordship's actual words and so it is not simply my fantasy that the state of the silver had made a small, but significant contribution towards the easing of relations between Lord Halifax and Herr Ribbentrop that evening^[5].

Example 12:

The fact that my attitude to this same suggestion underwent a change over the following days – **indeed, that the notion of a trip to the West Country took an ever-increasing hold on my thoughts** – is no doubt substantially attributable to – **and why should I hide it?** – the arrival of Miss Kenton's letter, her first in almost seven years if one discounts the Christmas cards^[5].

Example 13:

Naturally – **and why should I not admit this?** – I have occasionally wondered to myself how things might have turned out in the long run had I not been so determined over the issue of our evening meetings; that is to say, had I relented on those several occasions over the weeks that followed when Miss Kenton suggested we reinstitute them^[5].

Example 14:

Indeed – **why should I not admit it?** – at that moment, my heart was breaking^[5].

From examples 12-14, Stevens frequently asks himself by using the interrogative sentence "why should I not...?" as a parenthesis, which demonstrates the contradiction in Stevens' mind. This is a comparatively typical signal of unreliable narration.

According to these examples, it is clear that these parentheses could be observed by seeing "point out" or a dash "-" punctuation mark to remind the readers whether the narrator of a novel is reliable or not. There are so many parentheses like this and also many other kinds of it in the novel, such as "let me make perfectly clear", "I feel I should explain", "I should point out", "I should say" and so on. Kathleen Wall, the emeritus English professor at the University of Regina who has four books to her name: two collections of poetry, a novel, and a book of literary criticism, pointed out, "The implied author also uses discourse to indicate the defensive tone of Stevens's narrative. The sheer number of these indicates the extent to which this narrative is, in some way that is largely unconscious, meant as a defense of his life and the values that have shaped it.^[8]" Ishiguro manipulates Stevens to express too many parentheses to make readers speculate or reminds the readers that he is unreliable. However, due to the fact that the implied author, the second self of the real author, has set norms, this causes the contradictory characteristics of Stevens.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the relationship between stylistics and narratology is complicated but easy. They are overlapping with each other, but are also different in some aspects. On the one hand, the unreliable narration could be identified from the language structure itself by stylistics. On the other hand, the realization of unreliable narration in the text is indivisible from the language structure by narration. From the stylistic research on the unreliable narration in *The Remains of the Day*, it is found that some language structures directly participate in the process of identifying unreliable narration, i.e. the influence of language structures on the narration is apparent, and stylistics and narration are not completely separated. Therefore, it is basic for both stylistics and narration to have the exploration in the language itself. If the real author wants to deceive the readers by manipulating the narrator to lead an unreliable narration, the language or text is of great importance and significance to be a clue to finding the real answer.

All in all, this paper mainly analyzes the unreliable narration with stylistics in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* from the three language features used by the author, including the ambiguous words, the double negatives, and the parentheses.

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