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CORRELATION OF TERMS 'FICTION' – 'NONFICTION' IN BIOGRAPHICAL WORKS BY PETER ACKROYD

Julia Bogatikova (a)*
*Corresponding author

(a)   Assistant Professor of Foreign Languages and Communicative Technologies Department, National University of Science and Technology 'MISiS', 4, Lenin av., 119049, Moscow, Russia, +7 (495) 955 - 00 – 51, bogatikova@gmail.com

Abstract

On the example of books by P. Ackroyd and the developed in Russia literary history and criticism studies of his works, this article discusses the existing terms in the sphere of fictional and nonfictional texts of biographies and history based literature, such as 'historical metafiction', 'docufiction', 'mockumentary', 'fake fiction', 'false narrative', etc., in comparison to the existing Russian terminology of text attribution; as well as in contrast to the genre and style of academic biography. The study of methodology for academic biographical writings in combination with the cognitive attitude in the form of gradual estimation gives grounds to an outline gradual scale, which considers variations of biographical genre from nonfictional informative texts to fictional creative writings. The parameters for grading such texts on the cognitive scale are summarized in the form of a chart, which includes the author and reader perceptive criteria for the suggested distribution of terms. The examples of some P. Ackroyd's books show that a particular author can create texts of different grades on the 'fiction – nonfiction' scale, even if it was not the writer's intention to mark his texts evidently as 'true' or 'false'. The suggested possible solutions for text attribution and the resulting readers' attitudes to reading modes of such texts are considered important for translation, interpretation and education in Russian-English linguistic and literary studies.

1.   Introduction

In contemporary media discourse structure the question of text attribution as 'fiction' (aesthetic object) or 'non-fiction' (texts based on authentic documents/facts) is of critical importance due to the problem of text veracity itself and the possibility of its verification by readers. The border between 'fiction' and 'nonfiction' is continuously stressed by such relatively new notions as 'fake news', 'false narrative', 'mockumentary', 'docufiction', etc. At the same time, not all of such notions are familiar in or adapted by Russian literary criticism terminology and are of little relevance to the traditional, rather rough, division of texts into 'fiction', 'docufiction' and 'nonfiction'. The contradictions between 'true' or 'false' become crucial in the process of reading, interpreting and studying of biographical works, including biographical books by P.Ackroyd.

2.   Problem Statement

As mentioned by A.Shubina, a strict borderline between fact and fiction in biographical genres, explored by P.Ackroyd, is being washed out and eroded; moreover, 'the literary heritage of the previous centuries as well as the documentary (nonfictional) discourse of the past are reinterpreted as a form of parody in contemporary fiction with the aim to discredit its status as a 'trustworthy evidence'' (Shubina, 2009) (all citations from Russian are translated by me. – J.B.). Alongside, E. Ushakova analyses the aspect of 'alternative authorial attitude' in 'the fusion of biography and novel' (Ushakova, 2001). In the quoted studies of texts by P. Ackroyd the question of text relevance to fiction or non-fiction criteria is left unconsciously omitted. The described transformations of the biographical genre are detected and explained, but not generalized into systematic attitude to fact and fiction from the point of view of readers' perception. This means that, while literary criticism may consider such texts as 'fiction' or a 'subjective source of information' from the historical perspective, mass readers still read such texts as nonfictional, 'true' documents about the described personalities and facts.

For example, M. Dubkova notes that 'yet in his research biographies the author inconspicuously shifts his aim from pure documentary text to the creation of a true-to-life character' (Dubkova, 2015). The very wording of this fragment shows that the moment of fact-fiction border crossing is left unseen by the readers, whereas the author is consciously creating the effect of ambiguity. Moreover, the term 'character' can be interpreted here both as a fictional 'literary hero' and as 'a biographical character of the real person'. This simultaneity of text perception both as fiction and non-fiction has been shown and discussed in the results of my previous reader perception survey (Bogatikova, 2013).

3.   Research Questions

The already mentioned authorial aim shift and, consequently, the uncertainty of the reading mode as fiction or non-fiction is a typical trait of contemporary texts in media discourse, from paper books of fiction and movies to journalism and essay writings in the form of on-line texts. These phenomena are described by a number of terms (usually of English origin) not quite set up and legitimate in Russian literary criticism, history and theory of literature. Some of them are: docufiction, docudrama, mockumentary, false narrative, false-fiction, pseudohistory, literary journalism, creative non-fiction, etc; each of which somehow describes one or another level of fact and fiction in texts, created by their authors as 'pseudo documentary' – a type of fiction technique discussed by me in (Bogatikova,

2012). From this perspective the biographical prose is a vivid example of texts, where the strictness of factography directly meets speculations, hypothesis, conjectures and all possible types of fictional creative guess work to create a 'true-to-life character'. That is why the main question of this article is the possibility and ways of organization of such borderline notions on a cognitive scale from fiction to non-fiction, when the strict border does not exist and a vast number of texts can be both true or false, fictional or non-fictional, depending on the relative notions of the authorial will or the readers' understanding.

4. Purpose of the Study

To answer the above stated question the purpose of this study is to suggest on the basis of the existing terms a variant of cognitive scale for fictional – nonfictional texts, which includes 1) the chosen by the author way of reconstructive connections between real facts; 2) the choice and selection of relevant facts among all the existing biographical materials. The cognitive scale can help in attribution of 'docufictional' and 'pseudodocumentary' texts for correct interpretation in the pragmatic aspect of reading.

5. Research Methods

The research methods are based on the discussion of biographical genres by A. Demchenko, who proposes 'a methodology of documentary literary criticism biography' (Demchenko, 2014), and enumerates legitimate criteria and methods for such texts. The researcher also notes a number of creative devices that are illegitimate for a documentary, non-fictional biography; for this study they are of use for the fictional part of the fiction-nonfiction cognitive scale, though. The method of 'gradual scaling' was suggested by V. Shabes in Sobytieitekst (1989). It seems practical to apply the existing biographical methods to the method of cognitive scaling in order to construct a correlative chart for text attribution as informatively 'true' or 'fictional'.

6. Findings

The following chart includes gradual scaling of textual characteristics from authentic, true-to-fact, and reliable to purely invented, unreliable, and fictional. None of the characteristics should be omitted as ineligible for the biography writing, but the authorial intentions, methods and purposes move the type of the text to this or that level on the gradual scale between the poles of 'fiction' and 'nonfiction'. That said, Column 1 presents the terms for relative definitions between the fiction – nonfiction poles and, importantly, between the terms themselves, as it creates the terminological structure for the existing descriptive notions. Column 2 shows the author's methods and creative devices used in his biographical writings, moving them in the scale as more or less 'true-false' and verifiable. Column 3 contains the suggested modus of readers' attitude and interpretation to text as a source of factual information or an aesthetic object. Column 4 presents examples of biographical texts by P.Ackroyd, which demonstrate the discussed principles of correlation between documentary, nonfictional and creative, fictional, attitudes.

Table 01. Fiction – Nonfiction Gradual Cognitive Scale for Biographical Text Attribution

1) Genre subtype, descriptive terms	2) Author's intention (I), purpose (P), methods (M)	3) Reading mode (RM). Reading purpose (RP)	4) Example of text (from books by P.Ackroyd)
Fiction, aesthetic text objective			
Biographical novel, historical novel, 'quasi-biography' (Dubkova, 2015).	I: creative fiction; P: aesthetic impression, imagery, emotional engagement; M: Creative literary devices.	RM: fictional narrative, mystification (about real persons, objects), (in historic decorations) RP: entertainment, emotional involvement.	*Hawksmoor* *The Plato Papers*
Fictional autobiography, 'alternative biography' (Galahova, 2016), 'geo-biography' (Dubkova, 2015).	I: creative fiction; P: aesthetic impression, imagery, emotional engagement; M: Creative literary devices + biographical material reestablished to reach the aesthetic aims.	RM: fictional narrative, emotional illusion of true narration, verisimilitude; RP: emotional experience, involvement, creative reinterpretation of factual information.	*The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* *London: The Biography* ('city as humanlike character' (Bogatikova, 2017))
Fictional (creative) biography, 'geo-biography', 'historiographic metaliterature' (Hutcheon, 1988).	I: metafiction, parafiction, imaginative writing; P: comprehensible, plain language but fascinating, thrilling narration about real facts; M: easy-reading literary devices + facts reestablished to form a self-consistent, convincing story.	RM: fictional narrative, where emotional interpretation dominates over factual information; RP: edutainment.	*Thames: Sacred River*
Presumable border for quantitative predominance of fictional (up) / nonfictional (down) characteristics			
Reconstruction narrative, recreation narrative; docudrama, docufiction.	I: Essay writing, opinion journalism; P: true to fact narration, creative adaptation of facts; M: chronological order, commenting, fact patterning (posterization), facts processing, spectrum bias.	RM: based on real events narrative; opinion interpretation of factual information; RP: accessible information, information knowledge; can be used as reference in non-academic discourse.	*Shakespeare: The Biography*
Fake fiction, fake news, false narrative, mockumentary, opinion based information.	I: intended, conscious misinformation, disinformation, propaganda; P: believable presentation of false / distorted information, illusion of authenticity; M: procession of facts, prepossession, fudge facts + academic / journalist style text devices to reach verisimilitude.	RM: As believable information, the misinformation mode appears when the reader believes, that the information is complete and objective, while it is intentionally biased/false. RP: Information, objective knowledge. The result of reading are cognitive aberration, misapprehensions.	Cases of reader's misinterpretation of Ackroyd's fictional books as nonfictional. E.g. *London:The Biography* read as a guidebook (wrong due to the volume of the book, impossible to read on foot)
Popular-science literature, semipopular literature; 'criticism and biography study (essay)' (Demchenko, 2014).	I: Journalism, academic research adapted for mass reader; P: general information, education; M: essay, explanatory mode of academic style, chronological	RM: credible, verifiable information source; RP: education, objective knowledge, can be used as reference in school education discourse.	*Ackroyd's Brief Lives* *The Collection: Journalism, Reviews, Essays, Short Stories, Lectures*

	order, literary devices are subordinate to provision of information.		
Academic biography, annals, chronicle, 'creative biography reference book' (Demchenko, 2014).	I: Academic methodology based biography; P: Objective research, complete, credible, verifiable description; M: facts are organized according to their internal (objective) relations; scientific methods, academic writing.	RM: source of credible, true information; RP: education, objective knowledge, can be used for reference in academic discourse.	*Ezra Pound and his World* *Blake*
Nonfiction, information text objective			

P. Ackroyd's creative biography and works demonstrate his contribution to almost all of the text types discussed above. The dominant conventional - and sometimes rather formal – criterion for text attribution as fiction or nonfiction is usually the direct authorial admonishment of the fictional/ nonfictional genre in extra-texts, such as prefaces, comments, notes, etc. However, Ackroyd consciously avoids this solution, establishing his own attitude to biographical writings, when everything can become materials for a vivid biographical character, including official historical documents, personal experience based documents (e.g. memoirs), fictional texts (e.g. novels, poems etc.), and all possible types of existing speculations and mystifications on the topic. As Lipchanskaja notes in her research on the writer's techniques of creating the image-character of London, 'Ackroyd alienates himself from strict historical method' (Lipchanskaja, 2014). The general features of documentary and creative styles in Ackoyd's books have been analyzed by Careva (2013), the text attribution as fiction/ nonfiction in her research was a priori taken for granted, though. The writer's liberal method of processing historical documents and academic research has been demonstrated in my study of my translation of a chapter from *London: The Biography*, (Bogatikova, 2017). To sum up, the literary criticism and stylistic analysis of fictional (creative) and nonfictional (documentary) text features correlation allows attributing each individual piece of writing according to the suggested cognitive scale; which in due course provides adequate text positioning in the sphere of fictional (aesthetic) or nonfictional (academic) discourse.

7. Conclusion

The introduced cognitive scale for text attribution as fiction of nonfiction allows to classify the accumulated amount of literary criticism, stylistic and linguistic results of research in the spheres of fictional and docufictional writings; and to systematically use it in the practice of translation, text reading and interpretation, language studies. The suggested approach facilitates the situations of ambiguity, when borderline docufictional texts can be interpreted differently by readers of different awareness level, depending on their presupposed subjective text attribution as 'fiction' or 'nonfiction'.

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