Making sense of atypical short stories: a cognitive and textual interpretation

Ricardo Sobreira[*]
Marcos Rogério Cintra[**]

RESUMO: Este trabalho discute como a construção do sentido de contos indeterminados pode variar em termos das estratégias de processamento cognitivo a depender da redundância da informação contextual. O aporte teórico baseia-se em estudos sobre o processamento cognitivo do discurso literário (VAN DIJK, 1979, 1999; THORSON, 2005; TOOLAN, 2016) e sobre os conhecimentos ativados durante a leitura (KLEIMAN, 2004; KOCH, 2006; MORATO, 2017). A metodologia abrange a realização de testes de compreensão de leitura com estudantes de ensino superior. A investigação permite verificar que os contos indeterminados podem demandar uma relativa "desautomatização" (KLEIMAN, 2004) no processamento cognitivo do leitor e uma acentuada aplicação do princípio da interpretabilidade (CHAROLLES, 1983).

Palavras-chave: processamento cognitivo; processo de construção de sentido; contos indeterminados.

Introduction

[*] Professor Adjunto de Inglês no Curso de Letras da Faculdade Interdisciplinar em Humanidades – Universidade Federal dos Vales do Jequitinhonha e Mucuri (UFVJM), *campus* de Diamantina – MG.
[**] Professor Adjunto de Linguística no Curso de Letras da Faculdade Interdisciplinar em Humanidades – Universidade Federal dos Vales do Jequitinhonha e Mucuri (UFVJM), *campus* de Diamantina – MG.

In this study we attempt to address the question of how indeterminate texts such as atypical short stories[1] may interfere with comprehension strategies regularly involved in reading comprehension. Here we examine two very short stories, "Ninguém" ("Nobody") (João Gilberto Noll) e "Scarletti Tilt" (Richard Brautigan), in order to compare the process of sense-making. This work thus aims at showing how interaction with these two narratives may vary in terms of cognitive processing strategies depending on the material contexts of the stories being clear or indeterminate.

Drawing ourselves upon a theoretical proposal carried out by Van Dijk (1979, 1999), as well as other approaches such as Thorson's (2005) and Toolan's (2016), this article examines the cognitive processing of literary discourse in terms of the role played by textual interpretation related to both clear and indeterminate texts. As the next section will explore in more depth, Van Dijk argues that a number of forms of literary discourses (especially poetry and modern fiction) may not present semantic macro-structure or put forward only a rather disconnected sort of macro-structure. The reason for this is related to the fact that these genres of literary discourse are characterized by a lack of not only superficial textual details but also contextual information redundancy, as well as a profusion of fragmented images and actions, violations of typical discourse categories and the suggestions of indeterminacies. As it also impacts coherence of the literary discourse, we have also based our arguments on Kleiman (2004), Koch (2006) and Morato (2017). Given the complexity of the issues involved in some of the indeterminacies implied by these literary discourses, we have also relied on Charolles's principle of interpretability (1983), a notion which relates to the reader's cognitive operations designed to reestablish coherence to texts that seem to lack cohesive nexus or indulge in indeterminacies.

In order to illustrate this discussion, we conducted a few experiments focusing on a selected group of undergraduate students associated with our institutional CAPES/PIBID-English[2] subproject. In this investigation, we have attempted to evaluate reading comprehension of literary passages by means of the administration of conventional multiple-choice reading comprehension tests and videotaped literary group discussions heavily dependent on comprehension based on prose retention (DOOLING; LACHMAN, 1971). The experiments took place in July-August 2012 and involved 60 undergraduate students.

Simply put, under "normal" circumstances, such as when one reads a realistic or conventional piece of literary writing, all the complex operations involved in cognitive textual processing occur in an almost involuntary manner. However, when one reads an extremely indeterminate text, such as an experimental poem by, say, Gertrude Stein or John Ashberry (GRAY, 2011, p. 193-5, 288-9) — and the experiment using think-aloud methods has made it

---

[1] The notions of typical and atypical stories were put forward by Schank and Abelson (1977). In their research, they found that both typicality and atypicality of actions and situations in a story have to do with schemas and scripts. Schemas are well-integrated chunks of knowledge about the world, events, actions, and people. Scripts imply information about the usual or expected sequence of events involved in a given episode, as well as the knowledge about events and their consequences. Schank and Abelson suggest, thus, that typical stories contain actions and situations which are consistent with the underlying script or schema developed by the reader. Atypical stories, on the other hand, include actions and situations which are inconsistent with the underlying script or schema of the reader.

[2] PIBID (*Programa Institucional de Bolsa de Iniciação à Docência*) is an initiative to improve the quality of education in Brazil by means of investments in initial and continuing teacher education. This program was designed by the Brazilian Ministry of Education in 2009 and it involves students, teachers and researchers from different levels of the national school system.

rather clear — the reader may experience difficulties that require different strategies of cognitive processing such as comprehension monitoring. As we shall see in more detail shortly, in this work we propose to examine how atypical literary texts such as Noll's prose piece can obscure or obstruct the implementation of reading processes in the mind. Before going any further, however, it is important to address the question of how subjects are believed to normally read and cognitively process texts.

1. Cognitive and textual processing of literary texts

In this study, we share the notion, put forward by scholars such as Koch (2006) and Adam (2017), that texts are forms of social cognition that allow humans to cognitively organize the world and to make sense of it. As Adam puts it: "texts allow us to confront cognitive visions (from other past or present cultures and, more broadly, from other people). The texts are *loci* of memorization, archiving, conservation and transmission of knowledge" (ADAM, 2017, p. 46).[3]

For this and other reasons, making sense of literary discourse involves, among other aspects, a cognitive dimension. As Van Dijk (1999) argues, the comprehension of how we make sense[4] of such discourse genres must necessarily go beyond the conventional notion of "interpretation" and include attempts at systematically explaining and reconstructing the cognitive processes involved in understanding literature. Grounding ourselves chiefly in the proposal conducted by Van Dijk (1979, 1999), in this section we attempt to elucidate how the reader or spectator actually comprehends and stores information or perceptions from literature (especially narratives).

According to this view, it is believed that readers gradually construct a conceptual or semantic representation of the text in their memories, i.e., a sort of mental model. The enormous variety of morphologic, syntactic and semantic information is "translated" or transformed — by means of complex sequences of cognitive processing in different levels — into meanings that are represented cognitively in terms of concepts (VAN DIJK, 1979, p. 145; 1999, p. 17-18). Both the long-term memory and the short-term memory are of fundamental importance to the execution of these processes. Short-term memory, whose capacity is limited, constitutes an area in which the flow of sensation, perception and information is initially analyzed and interpreted.

These operations are usually performed in a nonlinear manner and their result, that is, the general scheme[5] derived from our comprehension of the individual propositions of a text,

---

[3] The translations in this essay are our own unless noted to be otherwise in the References section.
[4] Although more needs to be said about this, we thus mean by "sense-making", following Toolan (2016), more than a reader's basic comprehension of a particular succession of superficial events in a narrative. Drawing himself upon a number of studies on narratology, stylistics and cognitive sciences (including Van Dijk's insights), Toolan (2016, p. 1) argues that "the 'sense' of a story that a reader comes away from it with combines an understanding of plot, of character, of themes, of ambience, and a whole timbre or perspective on the world: the reader's mind is animated by reflections on multiple possibilities and ideas." That activation has been caused crucially by the text — understood as a textured multi-sentence network of distinct and differently-functioning parts — and the reader's cognitive processing of its strategic sequencing, segmentation, lexical and situational repetitions, intersentential cohesion, mental picturing and so on (TOOLAN, 2016).
[5] For an extended discussion on how people appear to create visual or spatial representations in their imaginations based on utterances according to a few theoretical frameworks, including schema theories, see Clark and Wege (2001).

for example, are stored in long-term memory. The data stored in long-term memory generally cannot be retrieved in their totality. Put differently, once the *conceptual* meaning of incoming information from short-term memory is constructed, there is no need to remember details and superficial structures of particular sentences. The structural details that are not believed to be very salient tend to be "forgotten" by the reader (VAN DIJK, 1979, p. 146).

There are at least two levels of semantic interpretation of literary discourse. The first one operates on the local level and it "involves the interpretation of sentences and the establishment of coherence relations between successive sentences" (VAN DIJK, 1979, p. 146) in a micro-structural action field. The second level is global and it is responsible for establishing "the theme, topic or gist of a text or a passage of a text" (VAN DIJK, 1979, p. 147), and for producing a more general and abstract interpretation based on semantic macro-structures.

Some of the operations involved in the second level of cognitive processing include not only "deletions" of the data which the readers find irrelevant for textual interpretation but also generalizations of whole sequences of propositions to obtain an even more general proposition, which is termed by Van Dijk a "super-concept" (e.g., "furniture" instead of "table", "chair", "bookcase", "desk", "bed" and other words which might refer to furniture). It is believed that this is how the human brain is able to cognitively process enormous amounts of patterns or frames (sets of propositions about social episodes) typically detected in particular actions or events outlined by narrative (1979, p. 146-7). Thorson (2005) associates such type of cognitive processing put forward by Van Dijk with Schema theory from Gestalt psychology. The basic claim of Schema theory is that a new experience is understood by comparison with a stereotypical version of a similar experience held in memory (THORSON, 2005, p. 93-105).

Van Dijk (1979) argues that such extensive cognitive processing of textual structures depends on the reader's previous readings and background knowledge, that is, the immense volume of data stored and organized in his long-term memory. This database of knowledge and previous reading experiences, whose arrangements vary enormously from person to person, allows him or her to identify frames (minimal propositions involved in recurring social episodes such as, say, travels, separations, murders etc.) detectable in narrative structures. This identification process enables him or her to recognize, at the local level, patterns of *coherent* relationships between micro-structural elements. The reader makes sense of a text, in the final analysis, whenever s/he is capable of integrating, summarizing, elaborating, or comprehension monitoring the facts or events projected or suggested by the text into consistent sets (1979, p. 148).

Besides semantic interpretations at local and global levels, during his or her reading activity the reader will invariably attempt to organize information derived from the story into chunks by performing further processes of generalization, deletion, integration, addition, substitution, to mention but a few. These information chunks derived from narrative constitute what Van Dijk calls schematic super-structures. The complex operations involved in literary discourse processing, which do not occur in a linear or definitive manner, denote a certain degree of variation depending on the reader's different cognitive arrangements and on which topics or themes s/he finds more relevant (1979, p. 149). As Van Dijk asserts,

> Typical for discourse comprehension, however, is the general requirement that texts must be assigned *coherence*. This means, among other things, that the respective sentences of a text should be (semantically) connected. In order to do this in STM [short-term memory] we must assume that a previous sentence,

or rather its underlying propositions, are still available in the storage room (the "buffer") of STM, so that they can be related with the propositions of the actual sentence being interpreted (1979, p. 146).

Unlike traditional literary works, Van Dijk points out that some forms of literary discourse such as poetry and modern fiction do not present semantic macro-structure or offer only a very fragmentary sort of macro-structure. They are, to a certain extent, *atypical*. Textual atypicality thus occurs when superficial textual details, whose fragmented nature not only violates typical categorizations but also lacks contextual information redundancy, cannot be "translated" into propositions or when these same propositions fail to connect by means either of explicit conditional relationships or of information retrieved from memory. Such "failures", which are associated with ambiguity, may block cognitive processing operations or may even result in partial comprehension since an immediate or obvious interpretation is not available for the reader. It may also result in "complete cognitive incoherence", forcing the reader to be satisfied with only partial interpretation of theme and atmosphere of the processed text (VAN DIJK, 1979, p. 149-58).

When cognitive processing at the local level or micro-structural articulations between propositions are not explicit, the reader may experience more difficulties to make sense of the text. S/he will need then to desautomatize his or her cognitive strategies and carry them out consciously by reformulating contexts and mental representations or by monitoring the whole comprehension process (KLEIMAN, 2004, p. 63). This is the basic difference between the readings of a typical narrative and an atypical text: the cognitive processing of the former tends to occur almost automatically whereas the cognitive processing of the latter requires conscious comprehension monitoring.

Whenever confronted with such unexpected or atypical texts, the reader will be forced to perform comprehension monitoring in a more conscious manner, as Kleiman puts it:

> [Textual] processing is essentially processing in the cognitive level, which functions without our conscious control when the text satisfies our expectations. However, when the text does not satisfy our expectations and beliefs, when it is unexpected, the reader sometimes needs to perform conscious monitoring and to desautomatize his or her cognitive strategies in order to comprehend it (2004, p. 59).

Although most texts (including literary ones) can be assigned coherence by means of them being semantically connected, there are a number of other "deviant" texts that problematize the assignment of explicit coherence and which require an emphasized adoption of a general "principle of interpretability" (CHAROLLES, 1983).[6] In section 3 we will cite examples of the two texts used in the multiple-choice reading comprehension tests that clearly

---

[6] Charolles has introduced the principle of interpretability as a performance, on the reader's part, of minimum cognitive operations to reinstate coherence to a text whose cohesive links are not explicit or readily given. Therefore, coherence constitutes a principle of interpretability, which is constructed by means of sophisticated interactions involving authors, texts and readers.

illustrate these differences in terms of cognitive processing of both typical and atypical narratives.

2. The data

The 60 undergraduate student participants (see Table I below) — who have been investigated using think-aloud methods, videotaped literary group discussions, and multiple-choice reading comprehension tests involving the two pieces in English language, "Ninguém" (translated as "Nobody") by Noll (Story 1) and "Scarlett Tilt" by Brautigan (Story 2) —, complained that one of the aforementioned narratives presented indeterminate situations and ambiguous words or passages with such a myriad of possible interpretations that they sometimes experienced difficulties in making sense of all the rich textures and complexities of the literary objects.[7]

Characteristic	No. (%) of respondents
Gender	
Male	15 (25%)
Female	45 (75%)
Total	60
Age distribution (years)	
18-24	39 (65%)
25-39	19 (32%)
40-65	2 (3%)
>65	—
University Class Rank	
Underclassmen	42 (70%)
Upperclassmen	18 (30%)

Table I. Characteristics of respondents (n=60)

As the experiments conducted have shown, most of the typical difficulties implicated in reading literary texts can be overcome by the readers' spontaneous mobilization of their background knowledge or textual and linguistic knowledge. These different knowledge levels can be mobilized in order to resolve textual ambiguity or obscurity: whenever the reader seems unable to comprehend a particular proposition through his or her linguistic knowledge, for example, s/he automatically activates other types of knowledge (e.g., background, encyclopedic, textual and so on) in order to compensate for his or her momentary comprehension "failures" (KLEIMAN, 2004, p. 16). By the same token, Koch (2006, p. 48), closely following here Heinemann and Viehweger (1991), notes that three major knowledge

---

[7] We will not discuss the specific problems involved in readers' literacy, individual differences in terms of their working memory capacities or cognitive disambiguation skills (for a comprehensive investigation on this subject, see MORRISSEY, 2008; TOMITCH, 1999) despite being aware that "there are as many readings as readers" (SUTHERLAND, 1990, p. 822). Although Tomitch (1999, p. 6-7), drawing herself upon studies in reception theory, argues that an individual's ability to perform disambiguation of complex propositions is related to, among other factors, his or her working memory capacity, we will have to further restrict our discussion to an attempt at outlining how readers *generally* process ambiguous or indeterminate fiction rather than trying to monitor in detail the innumerous individual variables involved in the cognitive processes of reading and understanding a literary text.

systems concur to enable textual processing: linguistic, encyclopedic and interactional knowledges (For an extended argument on this topic, see also MORATO, 2017, p. 414-415).

3. Analysis of indeterminacy

From our discussion of the first section, it should be clear that atypical textual constructions tend to obscure sense making of literary works by obstructing cognitive processing of propositions. Although more needs to be said about *processing*, this term refers to an activity of grouping different words, discreet units, into larger categories or chunks of meaningful information (KLEIMAN, 2004, p. 14-15). The occurrence of such semantic "problems" as lack of information redundancy, the manifestation of vagueness and indeterminacies in a text may result in incoherence and render the text atypical in terms of cognitive processing.

Unlike ambiguity and ambivalence,[8] indeterminacy refers to the "lack of clear or exact meaning" (EAGLETON, 2007, p. 167). Cuddon (1999, p. 418) defines indeterminacy as elements in, say, a novel or a short story, "which depend for their effect or result on a reader's interpretation and which may be interpreted in a number of different (and, conceivably, mutually conflicting) ways. Skrainka (1993, p. 3) associates forms of ambiguity and indeterminacy with "disruptions and ruptures of chronological continuity of the intrigue; multiple and unreliable narrators; ambiguities and textual gaps; contradictions". Perloff (1993), by the same token, suggests that violations of narrative progression, drastic suppressions of material contexts involving characters and situations, unstable subjects and narrators are among the varied repertoire of literary techniques that can be associated with indeterminacy.

Having briefly explained the meaning of indeterminacy, now the focus shifts to how readers process cognitively textual propositions as s/he reads a conventional text such as Brautigan's narrative and then, in what follows, we attempt to analyze the processing of unconventional (or indeterminate) texts such as Noll's piece.

The following is a full transcript of a short prose piece called "Ninguém" ("Nobody"), which was included in the collection *Mínimos, múltiplos, comuns* (2003), by the late Brazilian author João Gilberto Noll:

> There was an ownerless look floating between the furniture and the chandelier… between the pictures and the dust lighted by a sunray. There was indeed a profound look there, and it looked half-numbed perhaps because of a precious compassion of everything and nothing, invisible among hissing pupils, I would say that they were foaming. This look looked like an atavistic insemination at that meeting of illustrious ones. Dominated by its vague appeal, I entered the bathroom to wash the hands, I don't know… as if to seal the outbreak of exclusion that turned me on. I saw a body bathing behind the

---

[8] Eagleton defines ambiguity as a word or passage whose meaning is difficult to determine due to alternative interpretations, and ambivalence as the presence of two determinate but conflicting meanings within a passage (2007, p. 125, 165).

curtain. "Who is it?" I heard. I muttered, "Nobody". And I started sneaking out through the service door (p. 32).[9]

This short story, which may remind the reader of Baudelaire's prose poems collected in *Le Spleen de Paris: petits poèmes en prose* (1869), lacks a familiarly patterned plot of rising and falling action, with a clear beginning, middle, and end. The relative dissociation of images offered by the narrator of "Nobody" has disconcerted those action-oriented readers who participated in the videotaped literary group discussion: a minority of them reported to be possible to construct a representation of location (5%), the main character's identity (13%), a specific period (20%) and to make sense of the events narrated (3%) (see Table II).

A considerable number of them confessed that they experienced difficulties to spontaneously establish relationships between the facts mentioned in the first half and the following ones evoked towards the end of the narrative. Their comments have shown that the actions and situations presented in the text were inconsistent with their underlying scripts and schemas. The text does not emerge readily equipped with a material context to help determine who the "I" is and what he is doing. It is also very difficult to unravel the meaning of the seemingly disembodied look that floats between the furniture and the chandelier. Other uncertainties reported included the lack of clear indications of when and where the story takes place. Did these facts happen in Brazil or elsewhere? At this very moment or two centuries ago? Who are these characters and what are they *actually* doing there? Instead of referential continuity, the text provides the reader with implausible events, somewhat pointless actions that make drawing inferences a harder process. 97% of respondents claimed that the events in the story did not make sense to them (see Table II).

Story 1: "Nobody" (NOLL, 2003, p. 32)	No. (%) of respondents*	Story 2: "The Scarlatti Tilt" (BRAUTIGAN, 1971, p. 50)	No. (%) of respondents*
The story takes place:		The story takes place:	
a) In a determinate location	3 (5%)	a) In a determinate location	60 (100%)
b) In an indeterminate location	57 (95%)	b) In an indeterminate location	0
The main character		The main character	
a) Is an identifiable individual	8 (13%)	a) Is an identifiable individual	51 (85%)
b) Is an indeterminate individual	52 (87%)	b) Is an indeterminate individual	9 (15%)
The story happens during		The story happens during	
a) A specific period	12 (20%)	a) A specific period	32 (53%)
b) In an unspecified period	48 (80%)	b) In an unspecified period	28 (47%)
The events narrated		The events narrated	
a) Make sense to me	2 (3%)	a) Make sense to me	60 (100%)
b) Do not make sense to me	58 (97%)	b) Do not make sense to me	0

---

[9] *Havia um olhar sem dono flutuando entre os móveis e o lustre... entre os quadros e o pó que uma faixa de sol alumiava. De fato, havia por ali um olhar submerso, meio entorpecido talvez por uma preciosa compaixão de tudo e nada, invisível por entre pupilas esfuziantes, diria que espumantes. Esse olhar parecia uma inseminação atávica naquela reunião de ilustres. Dominado por seu apelo vago, entrei no banheiro para lavar as mãos, não sei... como que para selar o surto de exclusão que me acendia. Vi um corpo a se banhar atrás da cortina. "Quem é?", escutei. Balbuciei: "Ninguém". E fui me esgueirando para a porta de serviço* (Noll, 2003, p. 32).

Table II. Prose comprehension based on multiple-choice reading comprehension tests (n=60)

Due to the presence of literally floating images and apparently unfinished actions, it is hard (maybe impossible) to determine if these "facts" happened at the same time and at the same place or if they are separated in space and time. Although readers tend to integrate cognitively the events and characters into a conventional sequence governed by causality and represent, thus, people living at the same location as being related (CHAROLLES, 1995), interpreters cannot spontaneously establish firm relations between the fictive beings projected by "Nobody". The vague semantic isotopy[10] constructed by the story is permeated by discontinuity and fragmentation, indeterminacies and illogicalities which challenge cognitive processing due to its causal disconnections and spatial disjunctions. The story also presents some ambiguous expressions such as "atavistic insemination" and the oxymoronic "precious compassion of everything and nothing", which clearly presents an unusual combination of contradictory, mutually excluding words. It could also be said that "Nobody"— to borrow Kleiman's words — does not satisfy the reader's expectations and beliefs. It could be regarded as relatively unexpected when it comes to material context, which renders it rather atypical in terms of cognitive processing. And, contrary to what one may think, its atypicality and indeterminacy do not have to do with its brevity.

The same readers, however, did not report difficulties to comprehend and determine the material context and time-space references of an even shorter piece such as Richard Brautigan's 1971 story "The Scarlatti Tilt": "'It's very hard to live in a studio apartment in San Jose with a man who's learning to play the violin.' That's what she told the police when she handed them the empty revolver" (1971, p. 50). Most participants were able not only to construct a representation of location (100%), main character's identity (85%), a specific period (53%), but also to make sense of the events narrated (100%) (see Table II).

Unlike Noll's piece, Brautigan's short story (reproduced above in its entirety) offers the reader a vivid sense of natural causality and referential continuity. Although this American author's literary production tends to be more "surreal and anarchic, whimsical and nostalgic" by "eschewing plot or structure" (GRAY, 2011, p. 295), the contextualized situations and the coherently connected sentences in "The Scarlatti Tilt" contribute — with its meagre 34 words — to the construction of a semantic isotopy that renders the story perfectly plausible and comparatively unambiguous. Through the interpretation of the sentences and the automatic establishment of coherence relations between the propositions, the readers investigated were able to gradually construct conceptual representations (as Van Dijk would put it) of the story. Put differently, the text — like a lead paragraph in journalism — includes brief answers to the questions of who, what, why, when, where, and how the key events in the story took place. Readers were able to recognize actions and situations consistent with their underlying schemas and scripts. This has occurred because, according to Van Dijk (1979), the cognitive elaboration of this mental model involves naturally the mobilization of the reader's varied forms of knowledge of similar narratives or experiences.

---

[10] Greimas (1966, p. 30) defines semantic isotopy as a redundant set of semantic categories that make possible a uniform reading of the narrative, as it results from partial readings of the utterances and from the resolution of their ambiguity, which is guided by the search for a single reading. In other words, isotopy is the through line that guides the reader or viewer in his or her cognitive processing of a number of propositions into a totalizing perspective (CHARAUDEAU; MAINGUENEAU, 2012, p. 292-294).

Besides, the participants who marked option "a" in one or more items in Table II (the story takes place in a determinate location, the main character is an identifiable individual, the story happens during a specific period, the events narrated make sense to me) were asked to formulate hypotheses about their imaginative representations (see Table III, below).

As for the Story 1, some of the subjects videotaped in the experiment have agreed that, in conventional terms, there is not a rigorous pattern of events in "Nobody". The text does not offer easily accessible explanations to some of the minimal actions narrated such as, for instance, what does motivate the "I" to be "dominated" by the disembodied or "ownerless" look if he had already described it as merely vague? The narrated incidents are so trivial that they would hardly be promoted into the foreground of a traditional short story since conventional manifestations of the genre tend to choose more "intense" actions in order to cause the reader to feel "interested" and, in the end, surprise him or her with an epiphany or a shocking event which would be able to offer some sense of closure (CORTÁZAR, 1974, p. 149-53). And the vague actions narrated by the disjointed narrative voice(s) in "Nobody" lack both fixed contours and finality.

The only pieces of information about the "I" who narrates the story is that it is a male (as expressed by the Portuguese word "*dominado*" in the original version) and that he outlines emotions such as uncertainty and slight feelings of uneasiness and boredom. There are no clear indications of his age, appearance, and occupation or of the reason why he refuses to reveal who he is when asked by the genderless "body bathing behind the curtain". The few participants (13%) who believed that the main character is a recognizable individual, identified him as being "a criminal", "a traveler" or "a visitor" (see Table III below). The clear majority of respondents (87%) were not able to determine who the main character is (see Table II above). The general absence of material context and the indeterminate causality obliterates the spontaneous associative processes involved in narrative comprehension, which is not totally unfamiliar to Noll's fiction (OTSUKA, 2001; BRAYNER, 2006; SOBREIRA, 2010). This is a common feature of most narrators in Noll's stories since they often attempt to inhibit the creation of a vivid and continuous representation in the reader's mind.

Story 1: "Nobody" (NOLL, 2003, p. 32)	No. (%) of respondents	Story 2: "The Scarlatti Tilt" (BRAUTIGAN, 1971, p. 50)	No. (%) of respondents
The story takes place		The story takes place	
In a determinate location: "mansion", "court of law".	3/60 (5%)	In a determinate location: "studio apartment in San Jose".	60/60 (100%)
The main character		The main character	
Is an identifiable individual: "a criminal", "a traveler", "a visitor".	8/60 (13%)	Is an identifiable individual: "a girlfriend", "a female roommate".	51/60 (85%)
The story happens during		The story happens during	
A specific period:	12/60 (20%)	A specific period:	32/60 (53%)
"21st century", "past few centuries".		"before handing the revolver to the police", "present time".	
The events narrated		The events narrated	
Make sense to me: "escapement", "flight".	2/60 (3%)	Make sense to me: "homicide", "murder".	60/60 (100%)

Table III. Main hypotheses formulated by participants who marked options "a" in Table II (n=60)

With respect to Story 2, most participants agreed that the situations narrated involved some sort of violent experience, namely "a homicide" or "a murder" (see Table III). Through the activities of textual processing of the minimal salient propositions the reader is able to recognize (even though it is conveyed in its most basic constitutive elements) a particular recurring social episode (in this case, a possible homicide) and then construct a super-concept concerning this narrative.

Noll's atypical narrative, on the other hand, fails deliberately, as mentioned above, to offer the reader such an opportunity for semantic interpretations at the local level and the construction of schematic super-structures. This is partly because of narrative indeterminacies, lack of logical causality, violation of narrative progression, dissociation of images, to name but a few. Throughout all the plot indeterminacies, however, what appears to be more problematic in Noll's short narrative is the suppression of material context. The same does not hold true for Brautigan's typical narrative, whose context is determinate: a female tells the police she shot a male student in a studio apartment in San Jose because he drove her insane by playing his out-of-tune violin.

Given the complexities of a text such as "Nobody", the subjects had difficulties to construct a coherent cognitive representation of the story in their minds. Although the respondents did the best they could, only few of them were able to come up with consistent hypotheses on the plot details (see Table III). As Van Dijk asserts, in such cases the reader has to resign himself or herself to a partial interpretation or a sort of problematic mental model. Five completely different possibilities of cognitive representations and interpretations of this particular piece by Noll are also offered by Raffa (2007, p. 176-179), Sobreira (2010, p. 36-52) and Neubern (2011, p. 43-44) who have tried to forge relations of contextual information redundancy between the propositions. But none of these attempts at inferring the material context seem to provide the reader with a consistent construction of a unified general scheme derived from the propositions. As most of the responses to the multiple-choice reading comprehension tests and the follow-up discussion conducted in the aforementioned experiment have shown, all these attempts at creating a cognitive representation of the story seem incomplete, problematic and provisional (see Tables II and III).

Conclusion

As Van Dijk (1979) has explained, "modern" narratives — such as, for instance, the piece by Noll — interfere with the *typical* operations involved in the cognitive processing of textual elements. This is the reason why we have termed Noll's pieces (and others alike) *atypical* narratives. Some of these atypical texts frustrate deliberately notions such as coherence because they do not present conventional syntactic and semantic connections.

As we have seen, the use of indeterminate constructions, the predominance of dissociated images and the lack of both proposition continuity and material context in the story "Nobody" cause the readers to experience difficulties in establishing relationships between a sentence or processed structure and previous or subsequent propositions. In the particular case of Noll's text, an action does not lead logically to another for the reason that a given proposition does not rely on the information (derived from a preceding proposition) available at the storage room of the reader's memory. Coherence and even textual cohesion linking ideas and images in Noll's piece are incomplete or "corrupted". Due to deliberate omissions of proposition

details, the reader either experiences difficulties or is unable to retrieve or totalize such fragmentary data.

We associate this set of atypical occurrences interfering with cognitive processing operations not only with ambiguity but also with narrative indeterminacy. As noted earlier, given its ambiguous (even oxymoronic) constructions, context suppression, discontinuous and indeterminate elements, Noll's piece eclipses conventional notions of explicit textual coherence and desautomatizes spontaneous sense-making. That is not to say that Noll's is a solipsistic text or a completely incoherent jumble of hermetic images. It is rather a piece of literary art devoted to the fragmentation of traditional ideas of plot, character, time and space. Although the interpretation of "Nobody" is highly conjectural (RAFFA, 2007; SOBREIRA, 2010; NEUBERN, 2011), what emerges from this particular piece can be interpreted as an intriguing portrait of the human subject and the human mind as fractured, unable to exercise control over the disparate circumstances and emotions of everyday life. Although not explicitly coherent at the semantic level, this literary object presents a deeper form of coherence — that the reader may infer by emphasizing his or her "principle of interpretability" (CHAROLLES, 1983) —, one that may be implicit and even paradoxical: the text promotes a sort of cognitive mapping of the human subject's mind confronted with complex experiences in the contemporary world.

Drawing ourselves upon Charolles's insights (1995, p. 150) according to which readers normally tend to experience more difficulties to memorize and make sense of texts characterized by implausibilities and lack of referential continuity, we hope that we have provided some grounds to support the contention that Noll's indeterminate text can be interpreted as an announced artistic commentary on the fragility of memory and the impossibilities of comprehending fragmentary realities of postmodernity (JAMESON, 1991). Unlike Brautigan's "The Scarlatti Tilt", which is exceptionally realistic for such a postmodern writer (RULAND; BRADBURY, 1991, p. 390), Noll, not only with "Nobody" but also with the collection as a whole, may have found in material context suppression and textual indeterminacies a narrative equivalent of the instabilities, loss of memory and incongruities afflicting the postmodern subject.

A construção de sentido em contos atípicos: uma interpretação textual e cognitiva

ABSTRACT: This article discusses how sense-making in indeterminate short stories may vary in terms of cognitive processing strategies depending on the redundancy of contextual information. The discussion is grounded on studies involving not only cognitive processing of literary discourse (VAN DIJK, 1979, 1999; THORSON, 2005; TOOLAN, 2016) but also the types of knowledges activated during reading (KLEIMAN, 2004; KOCH, 2006; MORATO, 2017). Methodologically, the study included multiple-choice reading comprehension tests to undergraduate students. The investigations showed that indeterminate short stories may require a relative "desautomatization" (KLEIMAN, 2004) of the reader's cognitive processing and an enhanced performance of the principle of interpretability (CHAROLLES, 1983).

Keywords: cognitive processing; sense-making; indeterminate short stories.

References

ADAM, J.-M. O que é linguística textual? In: SOUZA, E. R. F.; PENHAVEL, E.; CINTRA, M. R. (Eds.) *Linguística textual*: interfaces e delimitações: homenagem a Ingedore Grünfeld Villaça Koch. São Paulo: Cortez, 2017, p. 23-57.

ASHBERY, J. *Collected poems, 1956-1987*. New York: Library of America, 2008.

BAUDELAIRE, C. *Le spleen de Paris*: petits poèmes en prose. Paris: Librio, 2010.

BRAUTIGAN, R. *Revenge of the lawn*: Stories 1962-1970. New York: Simon, 1971.

BRAYNER, A. R. A. *Body, corporeal perception and aesthetic experience in the work of João Gilberto Noll*. 2006. 256 f. (Doutorado) - King's College, University of London, 2006.

CHARAUDEAU, P. ; MAINGUENEAU, D. *Dicionário de análise do discurso*. 3. ed. Tradução Fabiana Komesu. São Paulo: Contexto, 2012.

CHAROLLES, M. Cohésion, cohérence et pertinence du discours. *Travaux de linguistique : Revue internationale de linguistique française*, n. 29, p. 125-51, 1995.

_____. Coherence as a principle of interpretability of discourse. *Text*, v. 3, n.1, p. 71-98, 1983.

CLARK, H. H.; WEGE, M. M. Imagination in discourse. In: SCHIFFRIN, D.; TANNEN, D.; HAMILTON, H. E. (Eds.). *Handbook of discourse analysis*. Malden: Blackwell, 2001, p. 772-786.

CORTÁZAR, J. *Valise de Cronópio*. Tradução Davi Arrigucci Júnior. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1974.

CUDDON, J. A. *The Penguin dictionary of literary terms & literary theory*. London: Penguin, 1999.

DOOLING, J. D.; LACHMAN, R. Effects of comprehension on retention of prose. *Journal of experimental psychology*, v. 88, p. 216-22, 1971.

EAGLETON, T. *How to read a poem*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007.

GRAY, R. *A brief history of American literature*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

GREIMAS, A. J. Éléments pour une théorie de l'interprétation du récit mythique. *Communications*, v. 8, p. 28-59, 1966.

HEINEMANN, W.; VIEHWEGER, D. *Textlinguistik*: eine Einführung. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991.

JAMESON, F. *Postmodernism or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991.

KLEIMAN, A. *Texto e leitor*: aspectos cognitivos da leitura. 9.ed. Campinas: Pontes, 2004.

KOCH, I. G. V. *Desvendando os segredos do texto*. 5. ed. São Paulo: Cortez, 2006.

MORATO, E. M. Linguística textual e cognição. In: SOUZA, E. R. F.; PENHAVEL, E.; CINTRA, M. R. (Eds.) *Linguística textual*: interfaces e delimitações: homenagem a Ingedore Grünfeld Villaça Koch. São Paulo: Cortez, 2017, p. 394-430.

MORRISSEY, L. *The constitution of literature*: literacy, democracy, and early English literary criticism. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008.

NEUBERN, F. *A arquitetura da criação*: um estudo de Mínimos, múltiplos, comuns, de João Gilberto Noll. 2011. 82 f. Dissertação (Mestrado) – Universidade Estadual Paulista, Araraquara, 2011.

NOLL, J. G. *Mínimos, múltiplos, comuns*. São Paulo: Francis, 2003.

OTSUKA, E. T. *Marcas da catástrofe*: experiência urbana e indústria cultural em Rubem Fonseca, João Gilberto Noll e Chico Buarque*. São Paulo: Nankin, 2001.

PERLOFF, M. *The poetics of indeterminacy*: Rimbaud to Cage*. Illinois: Northwest, 1993.

RAFFA, C. R. S. *Os fios e a teia*: Mínimos, múltiplos comuns de João Gilberto Noll. 2007. 255 f. Dissertação (Mestrado) - Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso do Sul, Três Lagoas, 2007.

RULAND, R.; BRADBURY, M. *From puritanism to postmodernism:* a history of American literature. New York: Viking, 1991.

SCHANK, R. C.; ABELSON, R. P. *Scripts, plans, goals and understanding*: an inquiry into human knowledge structures. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1977.

SKRAINKA, S. L. *L'Enfant de sable: roman de l'ambiguïté*. 1993. 304 f. Dissertação (Mestrado) - University of Virginia, 1993.

SOBREIRA, R. *Escritas indeterminadas e sujeitos fragmentários em contos pós-modernos de João Gilberto Noll e Sam Shepard*. 2010. 177 f. Tese (Doutorado) – Universidade Estadual Paulista, São José do Rio Preto, 2010.

STEIN, G. *Writings 1932-1946*. New York: Library of America, 1998.

SUTHERLAND, J. Production and reception of the literary book. In: COYLE, M. (Ed.). *Encyclopedia of literature and criticism*. London: Routledge, 1990, p. 809-938.

THORSON, S. Naturalization, desautomatization, and estrangement: problems of literary reception and cognition in academic teaching. In: AIJMER, K., ALVSTAD, C. (Eds.). *New tendencies in translation studies*. Göteborg: Göteborg University Press, 2005, p. 93-105.

TOMITCH, L. M. B. Individual differences in working memory capacity and the recall of predicted elements in the text. In: ANNUAL MEETING OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR APPLIED LINGUISTICS. *Proceedings...* Stamford CT, 1999, p. 1-32.

TOOLAN, M. *Making sense of narrative text*: situation, repetition, and picturing in the reading of short stories. New York and London: Routledge, 2016.

VAN DIJK, T. A. Discurso y literatura: nuevos planteamientos sobre el análisis de los géneros literarios. Tradução Diego Hernández García. Madrid: Visor, 1999.

_____. Cognitive processing of literary discourse. *Poetics today*, v. 1, p. 143-60, 1979.