

Expanded Summary

The importance of presuppositions and universe of discourse studies in teaching experiences

A importância dos estudos de pressuposições e universo do discurso nas experiências de ensino

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ABSTRACT

This expanded abstract intends to discuss some possibilities of insertion of the concepts of “Universe of Discourse”, from Semantics (Hurford; Heasley; Smith, 2007) and “Presupposition”, from Pragmatics (Yule, (1996/2016) in the teaching (and analysis) of language in an English teaching classroom. The textual resource analyzed in this work was taken from the novelization of the Resident Evil games, widely known among young people. The analysis was conducted considering the theoretical contributions of Presuppositions and Universe of Discourse, discussed by Yule (1996/2016) and Hurford, Heasley, and Smith (2007), respectively. Digital literary texts explored in the classroom can be great allies in the teaching of language as social practice increasing the learning potential of students, once they serve as vivid examples of the role language assumes in interactive processes.

Keywords: English Teaching for Teenagers; Digital Literary Texts; Universe of the Discourse; Presuppositions

RESUMO

Este resumo expandido procura discutir algumas possibilidades de inserção dos conceitos de “Universo do Discurso”, da Semântica (Hurford; Heasley; Smith, 2007) e de “Pressuposição”, da Pragmática (Yule, (1996/2016) no ensino (e na análise) da linguagem em sala de aula de língua Inglesa. O recurso textual analisado neste trabalho foi retirado da novelização dos jogos de Resident Evil, amplamente conhecido entre os jovens. A análise foi feita considerando as contribuições teóricas acerca de pressuposições e universo do discurso, embasada nos textos de Yule (1996/2016) e Hurford, Heasley e Smith (2007), respectivamente. Os textos literários digitais explorados em sala de aula podem ser grandes aliados no ensino da linguagem como prática social, engrandecendo o potencial de aprendizado dos alunos, uma vez que servem de exemplo vivo do papel da linguagem em processos interativos.

Palavras-chave: Ensino de Inglês para Adolescentes, Textos Literários Digitais; Universo do Discurso; Pressuposições

1 INTRODUCTION

This extended abstract aims to illustrate how we could explore the concepts, presuppositions and universe of the discourse in the analysis of a digital literary text. Guided by Yule (1996) and Hurford, Heasley and Smith (2007), this work explores the theoretical foundations, semantic manifestations, and pragmatic implications of presuppositions and the universe of discourse. It also examines how these concepts are defined and also how they could be explored in the analysis of a fiction (digital) text, seeking to identify the importance of teaching language as social practice for teenage students.

Presuppositions and universe of discourse are two fundamental concepts in Pragmatics and Semantics, respectively, as they play a crucial role in the understanding of implicit meanings and the contextual aspects of utterances. The study of presupposition can help teachers and students to better understand each other in order to improve class development, enhance students' perception about others' discourses, their interpretations and assist them as producers of texts, especially because "presuppositions are valuable tools which language uses to guide the recipient of an utterance, discourse or text towards its intended meaning" (Kamp, 2013 p. 455). The universe of discourse, on the other hand, considers any utterance as connected to a particular world, real or imaginary (or part real, part imaginary), that speakers assume when they are uttering (Hurford, Heasley & Smith, 2007 p. 62). Therefore, its understanding can create a more prone scenario in which students and teachers get to know each other as individuals connected, or not, by one or more, real or fictional, universes (of discourse) and provide a more familiar and contextualized environment to develop educational activities.

Presuppositions are implicit assumptions or beliefs that speakers make in their utterances (Yule, 1996 p. 133). These assumptions are not explicitly stated but are rather taken for granted by the speaker, shaping the meaning and interpretation of the

discourse. Presuppositions can be triggered by certain linguistic expressions, such as definite descriptions (“the”, “this”), factive verbs (“know”, “realize”), and certain adverbs (“again”, “still”), as stated by Yule (1996). They can also be influenced by contextual factors and shared knowledge between the speaker and the listener. Theoretical frameworks, such as the theory of presupposition projection developed by Karttunen (1974) and Heim’s (1992) work, have provided insights into how presuppositions are projected and resolved in discourse. Additionally, Stalnaker (1974) has proposed a pragmatic approach to presuppositions, emphasizing their role in communication and the importance of accommodating presupposed information.

There are many types of presuppositions, such as structural, non-factive, counterfactual. However, for this analysis, the types employed were existential, factive and lexical presuppositions, mainly due to its frequent incidence in different moments of the analyzed text. Table 1 gives us a better understanding of their meanings and functionalities:

Table 1

Presupposition	Meaning	Example
Existential	The speaker is assumed to be committed to the existence of the entities named.	Robert’s car is black. >> There is a person called Robert
Factive	The presupposed information following a verb like “know” or “be” can be treated as a fact.	Anna’s cat died. >> Anna had a cat, and it’s dead now
Lexical	The use of one form with its asserted meaning is conventionally interpreted with the presupposition that another (non-asserted) meaning is understood.	Naruto stopped screaming so frequently. >> Naruto used to scream a lot.

Source: Yule (2016)

The universe of discourse, on the other hand, is the set of all possible objects or individuals that are relevant to a particular discussion or problem. Hurford, Heasley

and Smith (2007) say that the universe of discourse defines the scope and boundaries within which statements or propositions are meaningful. In formal logic, the universe of discourse is crucial for interpreting and evaluating quantified statements, for example, in predicate logic, the universe of discourse specifies the range of possible values that variables can take. In linguistics, the universe of discourse is essential for understanding context and meaning in language. It helps clarifying ambiguous statements and ensure that communication is effective within a given context (Akmajian, Demers, Farmer & Harnish, 2017).

For instance, if the topic is “zombies”, the universe of discourse leads us to think about Haitian mythology, the Resident Evil universe, RPG table games and many other sets of universes. Therefore, this universe is limited to this specific group and the specificities present in it. In this sense, statements like “Aim the head to kill them” or “If one of them bites you, you turn into one of them” are meaningful within this context, but might not apply to “creatures”/people outside this universe. Another example would be the “magic world”. When someone talks about this fictitious world, what world exactly are they referring to? Harry Potter’s universe, Disney universe, then many other worlds could be included. On the other hand, if someone says “Avada Kedavra”, Harry Potter’s fans will receive the message and understand the meaning of the utterance, because they are aware of the existence and non-existence of this universe and its particularities. Literary studies help us discern good and evil, entertain, provide cultural literacy, and discover hidden talents (Shankrappa, 2023). This is the reason why teaching (and analyzing) language using literary texts can be of great importance. In other words, working with literary text means working on particular cultures and language in its full form.

Understanding presuppositions and universe of discourses is of paramount importance for teachers across various domains, especially in the field of language education, since teachers can better navigate and interpret students’ responses, identify underlying assumptions, address potential misunderstandings and foster

clearer communication in the classroom. Additionally, by acknowledging diverse perspectives and potential presuppositions held by students, educators can foster an atmosphere that values different viewpoints and encourages an open dialogue and critical thinking. The reading and writing skills can become more coherent, developed in a contextualized way, avoiding misunderstandings.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Context of Analysis

The context of analysis is the novel “Resident Evil: City of The Dead”, written by Stephani D. Perry and published in May, 1999. The book is a novelization of the game Resident Evil 2 and tells the story of Leon S. Kennedy and Claire Redfield during a night in Raccoon City, recently caught off guard by a virus leak which turned almost the whole city citizens into starving zombies. They try to figure out what happened in the city before they have arrived and discover a big network of corruption involving the most powerful pharmaceutical company of the region and, as they try to survive, they look for a way to unmask the company, Umbrella Corporation.

To develop this analysis, an excerpt of the novel was selected, taking as theoretical reference the two concepts aforementioned: universe of discourses and presuppositions, seeking to understand their effects in the process of interactions established by the characters in the novel.

2.2 Corpus

A textual extract was selected with the intention of bringing closer the students' understandings and knowledge on the resident evil story universe and the zombie apocalypse environment, at the same time, this corpus was also explored in order to facilitate the introduction of the studies involving presuppositions and discourse (the universe of discourse). It is important to highlight that the extract selected intended

to engage and maintain students in the process of reading, playing or even watching the story, considering that the book is based on a video game saga which was also adapted to movies and cartoons. For its widespread characteristic, the Resident Evil saga can be used in a classroom context.

The textual extract selected for the analysis is:

For a beat, there was nothing - and then another grunt, a muted moan that raised the hair on the back of her neck. In spite of her misgivings, Claire hurried toward the back, suddenly feeling childish for her desire to leave; maybe there had been a robbery, maybe the customers had been tied up and gagged - or even worse, so badly injured that they couldn't cry out. Like it or not, she was involved. Claire reached the end of the counter, pivoted left... and froze, eyes wide, feeling as though she'd been physically slapped. Next to a cart loaded with trays was a balding man dressed in cook's whites, his back to her. He was crouched over the body of a waitress; but there was something very wrong about her, so wrong that Claire's mind couldn't quite accept it at first. Her shocked gaze took in the pink uniform, the walking shoes, even the plastic name tag still pinned to the woman's chest, what looked like "Julie" or "Julia."..... her head. Her head is missing.

Once Claire realized what was wrong, she couldn't force herself to un-realize it, as much as she wanted to. There was only a pool of drying blood where the waitress's head should have been, a sticky puddle surrounded by fragments of skull and dark mashed hair and chunks of miscellaneous gore. The cook had his hands over his face, and as Claire stared in horror at the headless corpse, he let out a low, pitiful wail. Claire opened her mouth, not sure what would come out. To scream, to ask him why, how, to offer to call for help - she honestly didn't know, and as the man turned to look up at her, hands dropping away, she was stunned to hear that nothing came out at all. He was eating the waitress. His thick fingers were clotted with dark bits of tissue; the strange and alien face he raised into view was smeared with blood. Zombie. (Perry. S, 1999, p. 15).

2.3 Procedures and category of analysis

The analysis intended to identify how presuppositions and universe of discourses are materialized in the excerpt selected, in order to offer a potential classroom teaching application.

To conduct the analysis, the three presuppositions mentioned (Table 1) were firstly identified and the meaning construed by them were discussed. Afterwards, the zombie's universe of discourse was explicitly explored in the text, showing the environment in which the novel takes place.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis firstly explored the potential presuppositions we can make based on the start of the narrative (Excerpt 1).

Excerpt 1:

For a beat, there was nothing - and then another grunt, a muted moan that raised the hair on the back of her neck. In spite of her misgivings, Claire hurried toward the back, suddenly feeling childish for her desire to leave; maybe there had been a robbery, maybe the customers had been tied up and gagged - or even worse, so badly injured that they couldn't cry out. Like it or not, she was involved. Claire reached the end of the counter, pivoted left... and froze, eyes wide, feeling as though she'd been physically slapped. Next to a cart loaded with trays was a balding man dressed in cook's whites, his back to her. He was crouched over the body of a waitress; but there was something very wrong about her, so wrong that Claire's mind couldn't quite accept it at first. Her shocked gaze took in the pink uniform, the walking shoes, even the plastic name tag still pinned to the woman's chest, what looked like "Julie" or "Julia."..... her head. Her head is missing.

While reading this excerpt in class we can question students whether they believe Claire is going to handle such a situation, as long as nothing can ensure that she will find a zombie, connecting the discussion to a potential existential presupposition: zombies exist. However, as the scene unfolds, it gives the readers a glimpse of what is coming

next, based on the narrative, a first confirmation of the existential presupposition can emerge indicated by the muted moan, Claire's misgivings and her perception of something being wrong in that place. Some other indication of zombies' existence may be connected to the fact Claire is not keen to disregard its existence, clarified by the statement "she couldn't force herself to unrealize it" (Excerpt 2), indicating the distressing nature of the revelation. Last, but not least, the communication breakdown, when she opens her mouth and nothing comes out, also indicates a sense of shock or trauma that hinders her ability to articulate a response.

So far, we can say that the narrative shows the existence of existential presupposition of different characters (Claire, the cook, the waitress called Julia or Julie) and the creature (a potential zombie) making disturbing noises in the context of a restaurant.

In addition, we can say that when she deduces "zombie" (Excerpt 2), we understand that this creature begins to exist in this universe.

Excerpt 2:

Once Claire realized what was wrong, she couldn't force herself to un-realize it, as much as she wanted to. There was only a pool of drying blood where the waitress's head should have been, a sticky puddle surrounded by fragments of skull and dark mashed hair and chunks of miscellaneous gore. The cook had his hands over his face, and as Claire stared in horror at the headless corpse, he let out a low, pitiful wail. Claire opened her mouth, not sure what would come out. To scream, to ask him why, how, to offer to call for help - she honestly didn't know, and as the man turned to look up at her, hands dropping away, she was stunned to hear that nothing came out at all. He was eating the waitress. His thick fingers were clotted with dark bits of tissue; the strange and alien face he raised into view was smeared with blood. Zombie.

Furthermore, the statements "Her head is missing" (Excerpt 1), "There was only a pool of drying blood where the waitress's head should have been" and "He was eating the waitress" are great examples of factive presuppositions (Excerpt 2), indicate the presence of factive presuppositions. The use of verbs such as "know", "realize", "regret", "aware", "be", "odd" and "glad" materialize factive presuppositions (Yule, 2016,

p. 27). Therefore, zombies exist (within this universe of discourse) because of the facts the zombie character was eating the waitress head and there was a pool of blood left as a result.

Finally, the lexical presupposition can be analyzed in the statements like “Claire opened her mouth, not sure what would come out” (Excerpt 2), referring to her surprise on what she was seeing, and “as the man turned to look up at her”, meaning that he wasn’t aware of her presence, as even after her walk, he had to turn back and look up to see her, presupposing that he was almost laid over the waitress body, providing the readers a great spatial scene.

The universe of discourse concepts in the text are important in shaping the context and understanding of the events described. They refer to the specific set of entities, events and circumstances that are relevant to the unfolding narrative, because it sets the stage for the story to happen. Also, here the concept of verisimilitude is crucial: if it is present, it is easier to engage readers. Being one of the main technical items of any narrative, verisimilitude is defined, according to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2001, p. 270), as

the literary principle that requires a consistent illusion of truth to life. The term covers both the exclusion of improbabilities (...) and the careful disguising of improbabilities in non-realistic works.

We can see that in the excerpts presented earlier, that includes the diner, the characters involved (Claire, the cook, the waitress) and the specific elements such as the cart loaded with trays, the missing head, the cook’s position over the waitress body, Claire’s sensations, etc. In addition, the universe of discourse influences the reader’s expectations about the genre and tone of the narrative. Elements like a diner, a cook, and a waitress initially suggest a typical scenario, although as the story progresses, the introduction of unsettling events (headless corpse, the cook eating the waitress) takes the narrative into the horror, fantasy or supernatural genre.

The universe of discourse also guides how readers interpret and react to the events. For example, the reference of a potential robbery or customers being tied up influences the initial expectations, and the shocking revelation of a headless corpse and the cook's bizarre actions takes the narrative in an unexpected direction. Besides, it establishes constraints on the meaning of various elements in the text, as we can notice in the fragment "He was eating the waitress". This fragment has a specific meaning within the context of this universe, indicating a horrifying and unnatural act. The distinct elements within this universe of discourse contribute to the emotional impact of the narrative, the description of the headless corpse, the cook's wail, and Claire's stunned reaction. Those elements are meaningful within the context of the diner setting, intensifying the horror and shock experienced by the characters and the reader. Therefore, it provides the contextual framework within which the narrative unfolds, adding depth and meaning to the events described.

4 CONCLUSION

This analysis contributed to visualize the potential of literary texts as effective sources of examples to be used in the classroom to deal with linguistic aspects, as Moffett states:

A course of reading that is structured according to some fundamental relations has advantages: the reader gains a perspective of the woods as he moves among the trees, and the spectacle of gradually shifting shapes permits him to grasp the facts about the field intuitively by himself (Moffett, 1968, p. 149).

There are a number of different ways and perspectives to teach presuppositions and universe of discourse in many levels of education. However, that is not a simple task. Many research proposals and projects need to be developed in order to understand and construct a really meaningful way to explore the theoretical aspects in the classroom.

“Resident evil” is a solidified saga and it has been a huge success from the 90’s until current times. This is the reason why this particular text was selected. It’s a classic of the survival horror genre and young people are familiar with it, especially if we consider the high school target audience. As a fictional world widely known, it is an interesting resource to capture teenagers’ attention which live nowadays in a society very much influenced by social media.

The results found in this analysis reinforce the possibilities of applying it in a real teaching environment. In terms of teaching, for us teachers and teachers-to-be, to know how to use these resources and explore students’ interpretation, critical thinking and curiosity during our classes, reinforce the approach of language as social practice, highlighting possibilities of integrating fictional text and linguistic features of analysis. The work with presuppositions has given us the opportunity to properly analyze the text, basing it on the linguistic evidences, which led to the presuppositions, while the universe of discourse has given us the chance to identify and understand the set of elements which textually constituted this context. As a follow-up activity, a debate can be guided in order for students to present their opinions around viruses, public healthcare, vaccines, biological weapons and many other topics, which could amplify the theme explored in the literary text.

Finally, we reinforce that the results of the analysis lead us to reflect on the potential applicability of this teaching suggestion in a basic education setting, considering that the analyzed text fragment comes from a book that is also part of a widely known game and film franchise among many young people. There are numerous possibilities that educators can develop activities that foster awareness of presuppositions and universe of discourses and their importance.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have stated that there is no conflict of interest.

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