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# MATCHING RELATIONS IN BORGES' *LA MUERTE Y LA BRÚJULA:* AN EXERCISE IN LINGUISTIC STYLISTICS[1]

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This article introduces and exemplifies a pervasive linguistic feature of literary and non-literary texts, the *matching relation*, and then sets out to demonstrate how matching relations are a basic organising device of the Borges short story. A close examination of the text shows how carefully constructed and worded the original is and how important clues are conveyed through the matching relations. A brief comparison of several translations shows that some of these crucial matching relations are obscured by careless translation.

In the short story *Death and the Compass*, by the Argentinian writer J.L. Borges, Lönnrot, detective and 'puro razonador', is tricked by his enemy, the 'pistolero' Dandy Red Scharlach, and lured to his death in the deserted villa of Triste-le-Roi.

The story is cunningly constructed because the trap depends on Lönnrot's self-deceiving belief in his own cleverness and on his desire to impose 'una explicación puramente rabínica' on an accidental murder. Moreover, it is cunningly narrated because, like all good detective stories, it contains all the necessary clues and yet both reader and detective allow themselves to be misled.

What I hope to show is that both the construction and the narration of the story exploit a basic psycholinguistic pattern, the Matching Relation, a narrative device familiar to most readers from their knowledge of traditional Western European children's stories.

At this point, I would urge anyone who has not read *La Muerte y la Brújula* to do so before reading any further.

### *Matching relations in stories for children*

One of the marked features of stories for young children and apparently one of the features which they greatly enjoy is repetition. If we look, for example, at the following

[1]Mike Hoey first introduced me to this story. We have since jointly and severally used it in narrative courses in England and abroad and it would be difficult to decide how much of this analysis is mine and how much his.

extracts from an early version of *Goldilocks*, what immediately strikes us is how much of the text is later repeated or is itself a repetition of something earlier and how little is novel or unique:

"Somebody has been at my porridge!" said the Great Huge Bear in his great rough gruff voice.....
"Somebody has been at my porridge!" said the Middle Bear in his middle voice...
"Somebody has been at my porridge, and has eaten it all up!" said the Little Small Wee Bear in his little, small wee, voice...........

(Opie and Opie 1980:266)

The Middle Bear repeats word for word what the Great Huge Bear said and the Little Bear repeats word for word what both have said, although he does add a second clause of his own. One paragraph later, we find exactly the same structure —utterance, repetition, repetition with addition:
"Somebody has been sitting in my chair".....
"Somebody has been sitting in my chair".....
"Somebody has been sitting in my chair, and has sate the bottom of it out!".....

Thus, by the time we get to the third complaint, "Somebody has been lying in my bed!", we (and any listening children) can confidently predict the rest of the sequence verbatim, except for the three new words in the Little Small Wee Bear's utterance:

"Somebody has been lying in my bed!" said the Great Huge Bear in his great rough gruff voice.....
"Somebody has been lying in my bed!" said the Middle Bear in his middle voice...
"Somebody has been lying in my bed and here she is!" said the Little Small Wee Bear in his little, small wee, voice.

These extracts represent extreme examples of what is a very common phenomenon in all written and spoken texts and which Winter (passim) has called the Matching Relation. Winter sees the matching relation as a *cognitive process*, shared by writer and reader, whereby they "interpret the meaning of a clause or group of clauses in the light of their adjoining clause or clauses" (1986:91). Textually, the matching relation is "characterised by a high degree of repetition between its clauses" (ibid: 92) but the relation functions to place emphasis on the *replacement*, that is on what is different or what is new in the matched clause. Thus, in the *Goldilocks* series in the first (Middle Bear) repetition only the speaker is new; in the second (Little Small Wee Bear) repetition there is both a new speaker and some new speech.

The interpretative problem for the reader when faced with a matching relation is to decide whether the items are being matched in order to focus on their similarity or *compatibility* or in order to focus on their difference or *contrast*; in other words, whether the replacement variable is to be regarded as semantically equivalent or as semantically different.

Many children's stories are partly structured in terms of a comparison of what happens to one character with what happens to another, or more often to several other characters. As Sacks (1972) pointed out, three is a better narrative number than two, because if the same thing happens to two characters this strongly suggests a norm

measured against which the third is seen as a deviation or a surprise. In Winter's terms, the reader is expected to see what happens to the first two characters as compatible and as contrasting with what happens to the third character. Thus, in the *Goldilocks* story what happens each time to the Great and Middle Bears is compatible —they share the same minor complaint that their porridge/chair/bed have been interfered with, whereas the Small Bear, by contrast, has serious complaints: his porridge has gone, his chair is broken and his bed is still being used.

We can easily recall many children's stories with the basic structure of two matching compatibles followed by a matching contrast —in *Rumpelstiltskin*, the miller's daughter has three nights of spinning, two which do not satisfy the king and one which does, and then three days in which to guess Rumpelstiltskin's name, two on which she fails and one on which she succeeds. In the *Three Little Pigs* we have two foolish pigs whose houses are huffed and puffed and blown down and one wise pig whose house survives.

In all such stories, at least in the traditional tellings, the matching is marked by massive repetition and minimal replacement. What the child learns from an early age is that the repetition is the clue to the matching but the significance of the matching is to be found in the replacement. Children also learn that the last character and/or event —whether there is a sequence of two (*Little Rose Red*), of three (*Three Billy Goats Gruff*), of four (*Mr. Nosey*), of seven (*The Seven Little Billy Goats*), or even of twelve (*The Twelve Dancing Princesses*)— will be in contrast with the other(s); if all were compatible, the response would be "so what?" and there would be no point to a story in which the wolf ate all the little pigs, or the miller's daughter kept forever spinning with no reward[2].

In *Goldilocks* we find an added complexity because not only are the utterances of the three bears matched but this matching structure itself is repeated three times and forms a macro-matching relation —in the first two compatible episodes the Little Bear can do no more than complain about the loss of his porridge and the damage to his chair, but in the third episode the culprit is still in his bed; thus, the third in the macro-series contrasts with the first two and this contrast marks the end of the series of episodes.

Matching, as Winter points out, can in fact be realised by the repetition of a single, minimal constant, as in his famous example "Buy it, Read it, Enjoy it". Indeed, although it is not usually expressed in this way, traditional poetic patterns like rhyme or alliteration are examples of minimal matching relation structures, the matching of the component phonemes of syllables: in the case of rhyme the constant is the final vowel (and consonant) r*an*/c*an*/m*an*; in the case of alliteration the constant is the initial consonant(s) *r*an/*r*ow/*r*ue.

Similarly, the whole phenomenon labelled by literary critics as *intertextuality* is another example of matching, but this time the reader is asked to supply the matched text, as in the headline I reproduce below from the front page of a supplement on Denmark in *Folha de São Paulo*.

Há algo de sadio no reino da Dinamarca

Sometimes, it is sufficient to pick up the reference and note the minimal change of a single word; sometimes, as in *La Muerte y la Brújula*, the reader is expected to match a

[2]Hoey (1987) presents a more detailed discussion of the role of matching in narrative.

whole set of relations, conventions and events. We know from other sources that Borges was an admirer of G.K. Chesterton and Conan Doyle, but even without that knowledge most readers read the opening of the story as prefiguring yet another triumph over a bumbling detective (Treviranus) by a clever Father Brown/Sherlock Holmes amateur (Lönnrot). Readers realise only too late that Borges in fact exploits the genre to mislead —Treviranus guesses right every time but is disregarded by both the reader and Lönnrot.

*La Muerte y la Brújula*

The sensitive analyst does not need even to read this story in order to discover that it is, at least in part, organised in terms of matching relations: a casual flicking of the pages reveals three significant sentences highlighted by italics and separated from the surrounding text by spaces:

1. *La primera letra del Nombre ha sido articulada.* (p. 146)
2. *La segunda letra del Nombre ha sido articulada.* (p. 147)
3. *La última de las letras del Nombre ha sido articulada.* (p. 149).

This immediately suggests that whatever else the story is about, it will contain a series of matched events and, to the perceptive analyst, implies that the third may be different from, and in contrast with, the first two —not only is it "La última..." but it is interestingly not "La última letra" but "La última de las letras". Once sensitised to the matching we discover that the story reports three matched murders. There is patterning in the dates,

1. El primer crimen ocurrió el día tres de diciembre. (p. 143)
2. El segundo crimen ocurrió la noche del tres de enero. (p. 147)
3. El tercer crimen ocurrió la noche del tres de febrero. (p. 148)

and in that all the victims are Jews,

1. Dr. Marcelo Yarmolinsky. (p. 143)
2. Daniel Simon Azevedo. (p. 147)
3. Ginzberg/Ginsburg/Gryphius. (p. 148)

Further examination reveals that the first two victims were murdered in the same words,

1. Una puñalada profunda le había partido el pecho. (p. 144)
1. Una puñalada profunda le había partido el pecho. (p. 147)

and that there is matching even in the place of death: North, West and East, representing "los vértices perfectos de un triángulo equilátero y místico" (p. 151):

1. en el Hõtel du Nord. (p. 143)
2. en el más desamparado y vacío de los huecos suburbios occidentales. (p. 147)
3. en la taberna de la Rue de Toulon, en el Este. (p. 157)

What should we make of this matching? Our experience from reading the kind of children's stories mentioned above would lead us to expect two compatible and one contrasting murder and that is what we seem to have. The first two victims are

murdered in the same way, with the same type of weapon, found wearing similar clothes along with a matched but unintelligible phrase that is a member of an indefinite series: first, second.... By contrast, the third "crimen" may not even have occurred —Treviranus suggests it may have been merely a "simulacro"—; there is no body, just a blood stain and, more significantly, this time the phrase explicitly refers to "La *última* de las letras". However, as we know, Lönnrot rejects the overt and familiar pattern of three, sets out to look for a fourth in the series, and finds instead his own death.

Lönnrot's problems began when he rejected Treviranus's suggestion that Yarmolinsky was murdered by mistake in favour of "una explicación rabínica". His strategy was to look for patterning in the events or circumstances of the death. The announcement of this strategy in the newspaper allowed Scharlach to organise two further murders on the lines of the first one; in other words, the whole trap was created through matching chance features of the first murder *post hoc* with those of the later ones.

The interpretation of matching relations depends in part on the interpreter and, as we have seen, the third "crimen" is in some ways significantly different from the first two; the patterning is beginning to falter: there is no body and no real evidence that the man suspected of being murdered is Jewish. Indeed even the overt patterning insists that the series is complete. But matching relations require an all-or-non assignment; either there is a match or there is not and, thus, when faced with items which partially match, the reader must either ignore some of the differences and prioritise the similarities or concentrate on those differences.

Scharlach's skill at this point is to introduce a new factor, "el día hebreo empieza al anochecer y dura hasta el siguiente anochecer", which implies a sequence of four and convinces the pure reasoner to ignore the deficiencies of the third matching, to classify the third "crimen" as compatible with the first two, and to wrongly predict on the basis of "la secreta morfología" that a fourth ritual murder of a Jew will occur in the villa Triste-le-Roi on the night of March 3$^{rd}$. Lönnrot's fatal mistake was to classify the first three murders as compatible and then to assume that the fourth would be compatible too.

## Postcript

Sadly, a translator may not always be aware of all the subtleties of matching which an author has carefully placed in his text and thus anyone who reads in translation may be denied some of the textual clues available in the original[3].

For example, the Italian translation obscures a matching contrast by rendering "La última de las letras" as "L'ultima lettera", while the identical repetition in the original of "una puñalada profunda le había partido el pecho", though maintained in the English translation, is lost in both Portuguese and Italian translations:

Uma punhalada profunda partira-lhe o peito
Uma punhalada profunda rachara-lhe o peito

[3]Some translators may, of course, add repetitions as an aid to readers, as happened in a translation of a children's story, *Mr. Nosey*, recently completed by a group of postgraduates taking my course in translation theory at the Federal University of Santa Catarina.

Una profonda pugnalata gli aveva squarciato il petto
Una pugnalata profonda gli aveva trafitto il petto

Similarly, careful readers will have noticed that Borges alternates the words "rombo" and "losange" for the patterns which Lönnrot was supposed to notice on the paint shop sign and harlequin's costume and interpret as confirming clues to the four part matching relation and which recur in the windows of Triste-le Roi. The English translation standardly substitutes "diamond" for both, the Italian uses both "losanghe" and "rombo" but unsystematically, while the Portuguese translation uses only "losango" although both words "losango" and "rombo" exist in Portuguese.

Ultimately, of course, we return to the fact that the matching relation is a cognitive relation and thus the textualisation of it is simply a guide to the reader —it would be possible for both Lönnrot and the reader to match the murders (and, of course, for Treviranus to deny the matching), even if there were no repetitions in the text. Indeed, although the series beginning "La primera letra" is in a real sense part of the story, that is, it is available to Lönnrot in exactly the same form as it is to the reader, the identicalness of the cause of death lies in the description "una puñalada profunda le había partido el pecho", and is therefore only part of the *telling* and not available to Lönnrot. In other words, textual matching is not essential for there to be a matching of content. However, it is not insignificant that children seem to prefer a telling which makes the matching clear.

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