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A COGNITIVE APPROACH TO THE NATURE OF LITERARY GENRES[1]

The paper challenges the mainstream perspectives on the character of literary genre. Usually, a genre is perceived as pertaining to the processes of identification-communication and not as belonging to the category of defining-classifying phenomena. Therefore, while analyzing and interpreting which genre a given text belongs to, we should first take into account the extent to which genologic categories are open – depending on how we determine the very existence of prototypes (within respective categories) and the family resemblance relations (which indicate the so-called prototype effect) between texts regarded as members of the same category. In one crucial respect, however, we should, first and foremost, consider the level of reception of the analyzed text. If we then assume that the very act of reading a text entails an act of communication between the sender and the recipient of this text, literary genres should be interpreted in the categories of fixed, conventional speech genres.

Keywords: literary genres, cognitive linguistics, prototype theory, categories and categorization, *family resemblance*

The Polish dictionary of literary genres defines literary genre as "a collection of rules which exist intersubjectively and determine the structure of the respective parts of a literary work at the same time being constantly updated by these rules to a various extent. [...] These rules – which at some point of the development of literary genres have been already deemed necessary – may be well considered only as one of the possibilities at a different time" (Głowiński 2001: 154). Can, however, each and every literary genre be defined by providing a closed catalogue of features which must be possessed by all examples belonging to the respective category in order to become its representative? How shall we therefore define (following the classical approach) such genres as an essay, a feature article or a romantic drama?

Roma Sendyka describes the "issues related to Genology" which literary researchers have been facing in the 2nd half of the 20th century in the following manner:

The 2nd half of the 20th century witnessed numerous attempts to describe the way in which literary genres function: starting with post-structuralism and

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hermeneutics (Jacques Derrida, La Loi du genre, 1980 and D.E. Hirsch, Validity in Interpretation, 1967), to reforming the traditional approach (Alastair Fowler, Kinds of Literature, 1982) to Marxism after Lukacs (Frederic Jameson, Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act, 1981). Snyder summarized these stances in the following manner: a genre became 'a vital generator of meanings and their negations (Derrida), an epistemological-linguistic control of meaning (Hirsch), a historical condition of meaning (Fowler) or a mediation between formal textual meaning and history (Jameson)'[2] (Sendyka 2006: 92).

She concludes:

What connects these various stances is a common belief that a traditional essentialist approach to genres is not sufficient whatsoever […]. Nowadays, by using the term 'genre' we shall at the same time modify a conventional understanding of the term by drawing conclusions from the fact that traditional essentialist names became a communication-identifying tool which serves solely as a means of creating a temporary understanding between a sender and a receiver. Alternatively, they are a kind of an intertextual, intra-genologic code and a type of a discussion with historical context and does not function as a classifying or defining instrument.[3]

In the field of literary studies, the prototypical model of categorizing various notions in the human mind based on cognitive psychology and Wittgenstein's philosophical reflections on the nature of the *family resemblance* resulted in revising the opinions on the nature of literary genres.

A classical approach to notions based on the principles described by Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* classifies them on the basis of the law of excluded middle, at the same time leaving the issue of gradation of a given feature unresolved and is an implication of the abovementioned gradation of to what extent does a given representative belong to a respective category. The categories which emerge in consequence always have very clear limits and all the elements that fit into these categories belong to them fully and equally.

The term *family resemblance* introduced by Ludwig Wittgenstein initiated a shift in perceiving the notions of a category and mental categorization. Deliberations over the nature of the GAME category lead him to question the validity of analytical definitions based on a collection of necessary and sufficient features present in each element of a given class. According to Wittgenstein, the correlation between the elements of a category is more likely to be free than based on a catalogue of features which are necessary for each example of a given category. Moreover, respective

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[2] Translation mine.
[3] Translation mine.

features overlap, even though none of them possesses a distinguishing quality (all *games* in Wittgenstein's research are considered as procedures, therefore 'activities', but each of them to a different extent). In Wittgenstein's opinion, whether an element belongs to a given category does not occur – as Aristotle intended – as a result of an analysis (definitional representation of a given feature or the lack of thereof), but rather as a decision whether *family resemblance* between the respective examples of the category is in place.

The prototype theory of concepts constitutes a valuable elaboration of and addition to Wittgenstein's concept of *family resemblance*. A series of experiments conducted by Eleanor Rosch proved that categories are structured internally around a certain core, whereas their membership to each category is a matter of a degree. Therefore, most categories do not have clear membership borders (Sendyka 2006: 109).

According to Rosch, categories display the so-called prototypical effect. This means that respective examples of a given term can be categorized by referring to a prototype – depending on the level of similarity between the two. Rosch claims that the key factor organizing each category and thus – together with the Wittgenstein's notion of *family resemblance,* which connects element belonging to it – includes also the frequency of occurrence or how well do they fit into a given category. A prototype, according to Rosch, is "an object which best reflects a structure of features attributed to a given category as a whole" (Sendyka 2006: 110)[4].

Rosch's research on category and categorization – which resulted in formulating the so-called Prototype Theory of Concepts – was inspired by an ethnolinguistic research conducted by Brent Berlin and Paul Kay. In 1969, the two researchers published the results of a pioneer research focused on how colors are perceived and represented in human brains (*Basic Color Terms. Their Universality and Evolution*). Their study challenged the prevalent belief that divisions in languages are created arbitrarily. On the basis of the analysis of ninety eight languages they discovered that the divisions in the color spectrum differ between languages (starting with only two names of colors in a New Guinea Dani tribe, to more complex names of various shades in Western languages) and that they differ between individual participants of the experiment who represented the same culture. Moreover, the researchers noticed that there exist colors which enjoy a more privileged status than others, i.e. colors which occur in many languages (black, white and the chromatic colors: red, yellow, green, blue, brown – eleven basic colors altogether). Interestingly enough, when it comes to basic colors, certain privileged colors were also observed. For example, although the opinions of the participants of the experiment varied as far as the scope of red was concerned, they were able to point out the reddest shade of red – thus the best example of a given color in their opinion – almost unanimously[5].

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[4] Translation mine.

[5] The results of the experiment by Berlin and Kay as quoted in R. Sendyką, *Nowoczesny esej...*, p. 105. Translation mine.

This last observation clearly supports the thesis that in the minds of the participants of the experiment there existed a centre–periphery continuum within the scope of each color. The level of whether or not a given color belongs to a given category is established in relation to it. The name of a color was based mostly on the basic color and then made more general to include the closest examples. Such a generalization may sometimes reach very far – as in the extreme case of the Dani tribe (only two colors). Typical examples are closely related in various languages despite the fact that the scope of one category may differ radically.

Yet another highly interesting study on linguistic categorization was conducted in 1973 by William Labov. The participants were asked to match a name with the drawing of a dish. While conducting the analysis, it turned out that there is no significant difference between the TEACUP and BOWL categories – both categories overlapped significantly. Moreover, the differences between categorizing a given object emerged not only when the participants differed from one another, but sometimes occurred in the case of one single person. The decision whether an object belonged to a given category depended not only on its physical attributes, but also on its functional features (defining what is the object used for) as well as on the interactive ones (how is it used), which are the result of the role each representative of a category has in a   given culture. The conclusion is clear: we cannot talk about the existence of one, individual attribute which determines the distinction between one category and other categories.

The above-mentioned idea was developed by George Lakoff in *Moral Politics. What Conservatives Know that Liberals Don't*. In his opinion, a prototype is a normal product of the human mind used in everyday discourse (Sendyka 2006: 111). A prototype is nothing else but a cognitive construct used for conducting a kind of a thinking process in itself – which, just like other categories, has a radial structure. Therefore, according to Lakoff, the prototype is:

a) a central subcategory of a radial category;
b) a typical example;
c) an ideal case;
d) anti-ideals cases, the negation of the ideas;
e) social stereotype;
f)a salient example, essential prototype (a hypothetical collection of features commonly associated with a given category)[6].

In this sense – and here Lakoff agrees with the opinions of Rosch – a prototype does not need to signify a specific element of a given category, but – what emphasized Taylor – may constitute a certain average value of characteristic but variable attributes (Taylor 2001: 84).

Nevertheless, cognitive psychology did not yet find an answer to the question how are prototypes created in our minds. It is believed that the initial exemplary

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[6] The views of G. Lakoff as quoted in R. Sendyką, *Nowoczesny esej...,* p.111. Translation mine.

model (a category represented by the first met element pertaining to it) in the process of gaining knowledge of categories creates a more abstract (a probable, based on a prototype and then maybe a classical) representation (Sendyka 2006: 112). In this sense, learning processes constitute the basis for categorization. These learning processes shall be understood as experiencing the world (and thus not only the world which varies between individuals, e.g. subjectively) but also – as Lakoff and Johnson intended it: the world which depends on a historical momentum, social factors or culture, and secondly, a world which may depend on our own understanding of an experience and how others perceive it (Lakoff, Johnson 1988: 183).

Categories created as a result of such a great number of contextual factors can therefore be neither common, nor constant. A prototype is thus a phenomenon modelled on each use of a given category. Therefore, on the one hand, since it functions in an individual dimension it is a detailed and precise construct, on the other hand – it is individual in manner since it makes communication impossible and does not allow certain users of a given language to enter into a relation. Sendyka accurately describes the nature of a prototype in this sense: "A prototype is a term which functions in a peculiar way: to some extent it is susceptible to change but at the same time it operates as if it was providing knowledge which does not get altered; susceptible to change but leading to an extensive convergence as far as the best examples of a given category are concerned" (Sendyka 2006: 112)[7].

The prototype theory of concepts described above was used in the late 1980s by Ryszard Nycz to formulate a hypothesis for analyzing literary genres in a proper way. By analyzing intertextual relations between a text and a genre, the researcher supported the anti-essentialist approach which, in his opinion, was necessary in the light of vague limits of genological categories. Therefore although a genre is to some extent considered a constant which is the result of meeting certain textual requirements, it is a constant that operates within a text and as such must be recognized. This recognition takes place by identifying family resemblance to archetext, a prototype representing an ideal case (which does not necessarily exist) which meets the norms of a genre best: either as an example of a real ideal case, as a collection of most typical features (statistical mean), or as a collection of features with the strongest divisive powers (in relation to other genres) (Nycz 2000: 94). According to Nycz, intertextuality is "a category encompassing the aspect of a general nature and relation of a text which indicates to what extent does its creation and reception depend on the knowledge of other texts and archetexts (rules of a genre, norms of stylistics and expression) posessed by agents of communication" (Nycz 2000: 94).

On the textual level, intertextuality is evoked by the so-called indicators of intertextuality – presupposition, anomaly – considered as a violation of conversational maxims. Moreover, Nycz emphasizes that although texts are the subject of Literary Studies (their characteristic features, relations, structure), while analyzing them we

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[7] Translation mine.

cannot neglect the fact that they are not "independent objects which remain unchanged regardless of how and whether or not they are understood". A text emphasizes the very existence and scope of its reference. However, how do we understand its meaning depends on "the analytical curiosity and an ever-changing literary and cultural competence of the receiver" (Nycz 2000: 83)[8].

Therefore if we were to treat literary genres as pertaining to the category of identification-communication and not as – in the terms of essentialism – defining-classifying phenomena, while analyzing and interpreting to which genre belongs a given text we shall take into account not only the fact (and the consequences) of to what extent the genologic categories are open – based on what we determine the very existence of prototypes (within respective categories) – and the family resemblance relations (which indicate the so-called prototype effect) between texts regarded as members of the same category; but also (or even above all) the level of receiving it. If we then assume that by the very act of reading a text there occurs an act of communication between the sender and the receiver of this text, literary genres shall be interpreted in the categories of fixed, conventional speech genres. Whether a given genre is used properly depends on – according to Jarosław Płuciennik – "a strictly defined world" (translation mine), shared by the sender and the receiver of a given message. He goes on to write that

> the roles embedded in the structure of a genre become the roles of a specific sender and receiver, and the potential (or virtual) world of a genre – the world of agents of communication. Both the roles and other indicators of this world are obligatory just as obligatory is the understanding of the meaning of the respective words in a message. A text creates "the possible world" which is not identical with the world depicted. It is rather the world of knowledge and roles to be performed by the true agents of communication. In other words, the sender defines the world (and the place of the receiver in this world) through the acts of choosing this and none the other structure of an utterance by assuming that this is the appropriate way of putting things[9] (Płuciennik 1995: 129).

According to Jarosław Płuciennik, the evaluation of whether the given elements of a message from the point of view of perceiving the communicative intention is conducted very often subconsciously by making a reference to the assumed, prototypical values: "When faced with ambiguous utterances, the receiver must use implicit, prototypical clues; it supplements the utterance by evaluating its adequacy – the relevance of certain clues in a context interpreted and accepted by him/her" (Płuciennik 1995: 127)[10].

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[8] Translation mine.

[9] Translation mine.

[10] Translation mine.

The fact that the sender and the receiver possess the same context is not only of paramount importance for their successful communication, but is also the source of creative literature and other imitative arts[11] (Płuciennik 1995: 123). He goes on to write:

> Context is a psychological creation, a collection of a listener's assumptions concerning the world. Of course, it is rather the assumptions than the real state of the world that influence how an utterance is interpreted. In this sense, the context is not limited to information on the direct physical surroundings or the utterances which preceded directly. Everything may have a meaning in the process of interpretation: expectations towards the future, research hypotheses or religious beliefs, memories, general foundations of a given culture and beliefs concerning the mental state of a speaker[12].

In this sense, if it is assumed that the world may be considered as a text, that everything can be verbalized, following presupposition suggested by Nycz, we shall also include in the scope of the text the area evoked within the text, referred to by cognitivists as *mental spaces*, s*cripts*, cognitive schemata or stereotypes of social awareness[13]. From the cognitive point of view, literary genres could easily function in a similar manner on the level of mental processes of sending and receiving a message.

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[11] Translation mine.

[12] Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, p. 15-16; quoted after J. Płuciennik, *Presupozycje, intertekstualność i coś ponadto...*, p.132. Translation mine.

[13] See: J. Płuciennik, *Presupozycje, intertekstualność i coś ponadto...*, p.125. Translation mine.

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