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In Search of Meaning: 'The Hours' and Meaning Construction

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Abstract. This paper deals with the way in which certain meanings originate from the participation of a multiplicity of cues that emerge from different modalities. The analysis is based on the implementation of specific linguistic and cognitive mechanisms that trigger the generation of the audience's unconscious construction of meaning. The corpus of the analysis concentrates on an excerpt of David Hare's script (2002) of the movie *The Hours: three women's lives*, by Stephen Daldry, that acts as the backbone of the analysis. The analysis is cross-referenced with parallel modality inputs (Kress 2009), such as specific filmic or visual details, found either in the scene or the rest of the movie. The approach of this qualitative study is mainly cognitive making special emphasis on the three types of underspecification proposed by Radden (2007a). It also draws from Langacker's (2008) proposals related to attention and perspective to identify figure-ground relations as determinant in the molding of the characters and their ideological standpoints in the scene.

Keywords: attention; mental spaces; multimodality; underspecification; perspective

En busca del significado: 'Las horas' y la construcción del significado

Resumen. Este artículo expone el modo en que determinados significados se originan a partir de la participación de una multiplicidad de señales que proceden de diversas modalidades. El análisis se centra en la aplicación de determinados mecanismos lingüísticos y cognitivos que fomentan en el público la construcción inconsciente de significados específicos. El corpus del análisis se centra en un fragmento del guión de David Hare (2002) de la película *The Hours: three women's lives*, de Stephen Daldry, que actúa como eje del análisis. El análisis tiene referencias cruzadas con entradas de modalidades paralelas (Kress 2009), como detalles fílmicos o visuales específicos, que se encuentran en la propia escena analizada o en el resto de la película. El enfoque de este estudio cualitativo es principalmente cognitivo, haciendo especial énfasis en los tres tipos de *underspecification* propuestos por Radden (2007a). También parte de las propuestas de Langacker (2008) relacionadas con la atención y la perspectiva para identificar las relaciones figura-fondo como determinantes en el moldeado de los personajes y sus puntos de vista ideológicos en la escena.

Palabras clave: atención; espacios mentales; multimodalidad; *underespecification*; perspectiva

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Contents. 1. Introduction. 2. Meaning Construction. 3. Methodology and Data 4. Analysis. 4.1. Meaning at morphological level. 4.2. Conveying ideological standpoints. 4.3. Gender reference and death. 5. Conclusions. References

1. Introduction

This paper departs from the idea that most communicative acts employ large numbers of cues, textual and non-textual, implicit and explicit, that encourage meaning construction. The potential of the information made available in the scene under analysis is enormous, alternating connotative and denotative messages which activate when they become relevant in the context they are employed. The words the participants use, the gestures involved in expressing their message, lip movement, the tone of voice, the aspect of the participants, to name only a few, take part in meaning construction (Forceville, 2009; Kress, 2009). These must enter into *active negotiation* with the viewers' individual encyclopedic knowledge, their knowledge of the world and their experience in order to find out what is sensible in the context the communication event takes place. Most of the extra-linguistic cues mentioned above are directly, or indirectly, present in any communication act, and if not as real phenomena, at least, they exist as default values in the mind of the participants. In a text-only usage event, the reader must add some of these by supplying specific default features to the action, such as faces for the characters, lip movement while they speak, intonation in direct speech comments, among others, when required. These, however, may remain part of the unconscious background knowledge and be 'non-interfering' elements. In movies, however, many of these must be incorporated into the action becoming "meaningful units" that materialize with the addition of images and sounds, and become part and parcel of the central message being communicated.

The apparent minor collaboration of a short scene from Stephen Daldry's movie *The Hours: three women's lives* and the contextual dependence it has on the movie provide a fairly restrictive framework to experiment on how language and image mediate between the conceptual strategies and the inferential processes that are required in meaning generation. Within the restricted context this scene provides, the objective of this paper is, thus, to highlight some of the linguistic and conceptual cues that collaborate in the construction of meaning, which will guide viewers to opt for specific lines of meaning interpretation. The issues dealt with in the studied excerpt are not independent from those in the rest of the movie, since the conceptual frames involved in the scene are dimensioned in relation to the contextual whole the movie conforms. Therefore, a proper understanding of the analysis must comply with the reader's prerequisite of being familiarized with the movie.

The aim of this analysis is to exploit the potential of "underspecified" sources as triggers for meaning. If, on the one side, the lack of proper textual or visual specification can be seen as a force that drives the audience to generate conceptual representations freely, on the other, modality diversification (the same message transmitted through two or more modes) acts as a reinforcing, opposing force that diminishes the number of unwanted meaning representations. As context plays a central role in meaning generation, it is only within specific contextual

environments that lexical choices can activate specific meanings. A slightly different contextual scenario would provoke the emergence of alternative results.

In the excerpt under analysis, the characters exploit the naivety of youth's mind-set to tackle some of the topics in the movie. The microanalysis of what the characters express gives clues to the existence of covert messages that contribute to the construction of meaning. As it will be seen, nothing in the script is superfluous and every concept has a function. The representation of the burial of a bird becomes a mock scenario for forcing ideological standpoints from the 'power' position of adults dialoguing with children.

The analysis starts with an overview of the organization of the information in the usage event configuring a ground space (Dancygier 2011) in which the narration sequences events (Radden et al., 2007b). Then, aspects related to attentional patterns and reference point relationships (Langacker 2008) are explored making special emphasis to meaning construction and the three types of underspecification proposed by Radden (2007a). Gender transformation, common in Woolf's work, is briefly discussed in the scene, before approaching the topic of death. After this, the analysis draws from conceptual metaphor (Lakoff 2003), such as death as a trip and heaven as a place, and mental space theory (Fauconnier 1997) and blending theory (Fauconnier & Turner 2002) to decipher the characters' mental implications when constructing the ideology of the main characters in the movie.

2. Meaning construction

The traditional view of linguistic meaning stems from the idea by which meaning is completely pre-set in advance within the linguistic units. It is easy to imagine words as containers of meaning and, by making use of language, speakers set words in a specific order to get the meaning they need. Meaning may be retrieved like this in some cases but, more often than not, meaning proves to be much more complex and dynamic than a mere composition of "semantic blocks" that are placed together in a specific order.

Indeed, the symbolic units that make up linguistic utterances only seem to favor the creation of meaning by contributing a small part of the meaning we eventually conceptualize. The fundamental idea behind this alternative way of approaching meaning is that meaning is considered to take place at the conceptual level. Langacker (2008:30) states that "rather than being fixed, the values of linguistic elements are actively negotiated; and rather than being static, the meanings of complex expressions emerge and develop in discourse." Bearing this in mind, the interaction of the participant elements within the usage event, linguistic and non-linguistic, sounds and images could also be included (Kress 2009), are sources of mental representations and must be assumed to take part in the conceptualization of meaning. Every item is potentially capable of provoking conceptual modifications when used together and interdependently. Radden et al. (2007a:1) stated that "Every transformation of a sensory stimulus into a mental representation is an instance of meaning construction, which is rooted in the interaction of human beings with their environment." The cooperation between different types of stimuli gives rise to a system that keeps refueling meaning and triggering alternative semantic dimensions that never stop adjusting to the context. This is a distinctive

feature that gives meaning construction its dynamic status. As Jean Aitchison (1990:40) put it "Word meanings cannot be pinned down, as if they were dead insects. Instead, they flutter around elusively like live butterflies. Or perhaps they should be likened to fish which slither out of one's grasp". Fauconnier (1997:37) reinforced this same idea when saying that "A language expression E does not have a meaning in itself, rather, it has a *meaning potential*, and is only within a complete discourse and in context that that meaning will actually be produced." Later Fauconnier (ibid.) states that "[...] the unfolding of discourse is a succession of cognitive configurations: each gives rise to the next, under pressure of context and grammar."

Communication acts happen in situations where not everything is described in as much detail, and as precisely, as it should be desirable for the intended meaning. When the participants in such situations are exposed to underspecified stimuli, their automatic, mental reaction is to (Radden, 2007a:3) "reinterpret apparent meaninglessness". G. Radden referred to this with the term *underspecification*. He stated that "underspecification is an essential feature of language in use." and quoted Fauconnier to illustrate this:

> Language is only the tip of a spectacular cognitive iceberg, and when we engage in any language activity, be it mundane or artistically creative, we draw unconsciously on vast cognitive resources, call up innumerable models and frames, set up multiple connections, coordinate large arrays of information, and engage in creative mappings, transfers and elaborations. Fauconnier's (1999:96)

Radden (2007a:5) mentioned three types of underspecification: *implicitness*, *indeterminacy* and *incompatibility*. When referring to the first type, he asserted that "no linguistic unit is present or that the linguistic unit is not conventionally associated with a particular meaning". In these contexts, one or more words trigger the activation of conventional frames to make sense of what is being said. Fauconnier and Turner's (2002:25–7) commented on the example *The beach is safe* to illustrate implicitness, where the word *safe* evokes a number of very different possible scenarios related to weather conditions, the people on the beach, or the speaker's ability to swim. Indeterminacy, on the other hand, (Radden 2007a:6) "refers to situations in which a linguistic unit is underspecified due to its vagueness in meaning". The linguistic element is explicitly there, but the listener has to reconstruct its specific meaning in the context of use. In "Her salary is reasonable" the word *reasonable* does not give accurate information about the salary she gets, high or low, and must be inferred from context. The last type, incompatibility (Radden 2007a:7), involves the reinterpretation of what is being said by the interlocutors to overcome some kind of conflict between the expressions, be it through tautology, metaphor, metonymy, oxymoron, or other figures of speech.

According to Verhagen (2005:10), language use also engages in "inferential reasoning." Wilson and Sperber (2012:38), inspired by Grice's conversational maxims (1989) and Sperber and Wilson (1995) in their relevance theory, developed what was meant by inferential communication by which the communicator's "ostensive behaviour automatically activates in the addressee some conceptual structure or idea" within a specific context. Only then the addressee will take this as "the starting point for an inferential process which should lead to the discovery

of the message […] that the communicator intended to convey." In filmic meaning production this is a central point in which a variety of modes, namely words, voice, intonation, visual and auditory messages, collaborate with a diversity of input messages that should indicate the solicited inferential path and, ultimately, the desired meaning. When it is so communicated, viewers can cross-check information made available through different modalities to reconstruct the targeted meanings. Meaning is, therefore, constructed with the help of inferential processes that prompt the conceptualizers to infer a sensible meaning out of the input information they are exposed to. Radden (2007a:4) said that "meaning construction is a dynamic process in which fine-tuning between the interlocutors plays an essential role." and this implies that processing demands constant on-line renegotiation of information as the action in the movie evolves. This would not be possible without every individual's available encyclopedic knowledge and knowledge of the world and the interaction of all other factors that participate in the usage event, such as personal attitudes or emotional limitations. About these other contextual factors, Evans (2009:13) distinguished "different sorts of contexts which serve to narrow the meaning of a word." or message, such as the utterance context, the manner of utterance, the extra-linguistic context or encyclopedic knowledge, among others. All of these facilitate meaning retrieval and, at the same time, restrict the emergence of unwanted meanings connoted by linguistic components.

'Attention' is another phenomenon that conditions meaning. Talmy L. (2000) and R. Langacker (2008) proposed that language encodes a subsystem of grammatical concepts related with cognitive domains such as space, time, force dynamics or cognitive phenomena related to attention. One of the aspects that has a direct relation with meaning construction is the concept of attention (Langacker 1987), linked to its three parameters, namely, selection, perspective and abstraction. Langacker (1987:115) argued that "attention is intrinsically associated with the intensity or energy level of cognitive processes, which translates experientially into greater prominence or salience." When the viewers of the movie are conditioned by what they hear and what they see, the selection of a specific lexical item in the script, expression or specific image will "amount to qualitatively different mental experiences; i.e. these will determine certain meanings in favor of other possible ones within the same frame." (Langacker 1987:117). Langacker refers to this as "focal adjustment" and it has a decisive effect on the conceptual representation of meaning. From the three parameters that are related to attention, i.e. selection, perspective and abstraction, the first, selection, determines those elements in the frame (Fillmore 1982) that are central to the message and how they are presented: the "profile" (Langacker 2008:66-70) will be the designated entity with maximum prominence whereas the "base" can be described as the contextual element to conform the profile. At the beginning of the excerpt, the word *changeling* provides a good exercise of focal adjustment at morphological level as a mental tool to retrieve meaning. Perspective is also present in the analysis with Langacker's (2008:73-8) *reference point relationship*. This type of mental scanning guides the receiver's attention towards perceptually salient (Giora 2003) entities that later will be used as reference points linked with other conceptual entities. The

term 'salient' refers to concepts that are most likely to be linked to specific experiences and situations that are part of every individual's schematic knowledge.

More complex mental conceptualizations relate to the development of ideological aspects related to the concepts of gender and death. These ideological standpoints are examined by commenting on conceptual metaphor (Lakoff 2003), namely death as a trip, or heaven as a place. These abstract mental representations draw from their corresponding idealized cognitive models, or frames (Fillmore 1982), to project the characters' assumed ideological conceptions. Mental space theory (Fauconnier 1997) and blending theory (Fauconnier & Turner 2002) propose an alternative way to represent conceptual processing. Conceptual blending occurs when two conceptual domains combine to create a blended mental space. Fauconnier & Turner's (2002:40) mental spaces are "small conceptual packets" that speakers create as they think and talk and are connected to "long-term schematic knowledge, also called 'frames'." When highly underspecified space builders are used, meaning construction involves "unpacking" blended concepts to recover the original input spaces and the vital relations that have been carried out. Only by the analysis of these processes the covert influence exerted on the audience's thoughts can be fully discerned as well as the mind-set and attitudes of the characters in the movie.

3. Methodology and data

The methodology for the analysis is based on the qualitative study of some of the conceptual and linguistic phenomena that are present in the selected excerpt from Stephen Daldry's movie *The Hours: three women's lives*. The investigation mainly deals with David Hare's script of the scene, which will act as the backbone of the analysis. However, references will be made to specific images or other sections of the movie when they are relevant to the analysis. While watching a movie, the audience is exposed to a continuous, complex flow of input information that must be integrated in a limited span of time. In these conditions, vast parts of what is communicated will be acquired, consciously or unconsciously, and may other parts lost. If this is so for the viewers, it will not be like this for the analysis. The analysis section has tried to describe the script to evaluate the frame and context every word is used in in order to, first, disclose any possible meaning it may entail, and second, vindicate its existence when supported by filmic action. The confluence of alternative modes to convey similar messages will be understood as an indication for interpretation. The analysis also comments on the limitations imposed to the comprehension of viewers and will provide brief comments to factual or cultural references. This type of analysis should expose some of the strategies that contribute to the molding of the characters involved in the movie, how these strategies build on their personalities and the way specific concepts are projected to the whole story.

The analyzed scene takes 2' 42'' and is concerned with the finding of a dying bird that has allegedly fallen from a tree. It is one of the domestic scenes that characterizes the setting where Virginia Woolf, one of the main characters in the movie, struggles between life and death. In this specific scene, Vanessa, Virginia's sister, has travelled from London to pay her a visit. The scene involves children

playing and interacting with adults. Vanessa's children, Quentin, Julian and Angelica, have found a dying bird while playing and, as part of the game, they decide to make a grave for the bird. Vanessa helps them do that. Later, the bird has already died and Angelica and Virginia are left alone and talk about death. The closing part redirects the scene back to the burden of Virginia's everyday life. This scene adds its share to the construction of a broader picture the movie portrays around one of the central topics being discussed, death.

Excerpt from *The Hours: three women's lives*. (Time: 43' 41'' – 46' 23'')

Quentin: Nessa, Nessa,
Vanessa: Hello, changelings. What have you got? What have you found?
Quentin: We found a bird.
Vanessa: Did you?
Angelica: Yes.
Vanessa: Where did you find that?
Quentin: I think he must have fallen from a tree.
Vanessa: Oh my Goodness! Just look at him.
Quentin: We might be able to save him.
Vanessa: Save him? I think you have to be careful, Quentin. There's a time to die, and it may be the bird's time...
Julian: Come on. Let's pick some grass to make a grave.
Vanessa: Oh, Julian!
Julian: I'm just saying, he at least needs a bed to die on.
Quentin: Come on, Nessa, let's make a grave! ... Nessa, come on.
Vanessa: Oh, God, very well, I'm coming. Wait for me there! Angelica, we'll be all right, stay where you are. You're going too fast, ooh!

(voices die away)

Virginia: Do you think she'd like roses?
Angelica: Is it a "she"?
Virginia: Yes, the females are larger... and less colorful.
Angelica: What happens when we die?
Virginia: What happens?... We return to the place that we came from.
Angelica: I don't remember where I came from.
Virginia: Nor do I.
Angelica: She looks very small.
Virginia: Yes...yes, that's one of the things that happen... We look smaller.
Angelica: But very peaceful.

(the boys and Vanessa get back, giggling)

Boys: Get Nessa.
Vanessa: Horrible. Horrible.
Vanessa: Is it done? Have you finished? Is the bird funeral complete?
Virginia: Yes.
Vanessa: Oh, well then. Are we to be denied tea altogether for coming so early?
Virginia: No, of course not.

Vanessa: Good. Come on, Angelica. Come on. Come on. Boys, come on. A cup of tea.
Quentin: Nessa, tell him to stop it.
Vanessa: Oh, stop it Julian.

(voices die away)

Vanessa: Virginia? We're going in.

The scene combines a certain taste of natural exchange of information and worldviews, having instances of reciprocal interaction, between adults and children. However, because the setting includes children, games and giggling, the portrayal of the perishing bird becomes a bit weird when it comes to be the focus of attention. Only after studying the scene in more detail, it is made obvious that the scene entails an entire world full of significance and implications, capable of rounding up the characters and their ideological views. On the whole, the scene provides key information about the conceptual world of the narrative and how this world is projected on the characters and the audience. References of death are present throughout the scene. At this point it is worth commenting that Virginia Woolf, being a real reference and, only in part, a fictional character, it is difficult to discern if David Hare's (2002) characters are really speaking the author's mind when expressing their opinions, or Hare's comments are biased by what he thinks Virginia's worldviews might be.

4. Analysis

At first sight, this short scene gives the audience an apparent relaxation of the action compared with the intensity and deepness of previous scenes. The expectations of the audience shift by the prospect of children playing and having a good time in the country, where one of the main characters, Virginia, lives. The general impression is that the viewers witness a homely moment that acts as an interlude and adds little to the central theme of the movie, since it is concerned with the naivety and innocence of children. The scene takes place in the open air, and there's a certain atmosphere of freedom and relaxation. The development of time and action follows the thread of the iconic sequence of events (Radden, 2007b:53) and the principle of sequential order, as if this was happening in real life. Langacker (2008:79) called this phenomenon 'temporal iconicity'.

1. A bird is found
2. The bird dies
3. The need for a grave
4. What happens when we die?
5. The funeral is complete
6. Everyday life is restored

The setting becomes the recognizable conceptual area where the scene develops. This area is called the *ground* and will serve as scenario to help the participants realize their communicative goals. The term *ground* (Dancygier 2011:139) indicates "the presence of the speaker and the hearer, as well as the location of the exchange, its history and goal, and the specific communicative goals of the

participants." Successive mental spaces, or frames (Fillmore 1982), will be built by setting links between what is said in the scene and its correlation with what has happened so far in the movie. The resulting construals generated this way organize dynamic mental scenarios that reveal high levels of complexity and abstractness.

4.1. Meaning at morphological level

A closer look at the script reveals that nothing is superfluous and every lexical item has a function. The scene begins as follows:

Quentin: Nessa, Nessa,
Vanessa: Hello, changelings. What have you got? What have you found?
Quentin: We found a bird.
Vanessa: Did you?
Angelica: Yes.
Vanessa: Where did you find that?
Quentin: I think he must have fallen from a tree.

"*Hello, changelings*" is the opening statement when Vanessa hears the children in the garden causing great fuss. The word *changeling* activates frames related to folk culture, folk beliefs and superstitions, and also to the world of fairies and trolls, linked to the themes of the 'supernatural' and 'death'. If the Oxford Dictionary defines the word as "a child believed to have been secretly substituted by fairies for the parents' real child in infancy." and combines the root word '*change'* with the German suffix '*+ling*', a suffix that usually forms diminutive words, the resulting meaning is 'a small change", or an "an unimportant change". Vanessa's lexical option to call her children at the very beginning of the scene is peculiar, even if used affectionately. The subtle malevolent force that is contained in the concept clashes with the motherly love Vanessa is expected to profess to her children. The inferential reasoning the viewers may follow with this word is that Vanessa's children, Quentin and Julian, have somehow lost part their naivety of young children and are not considered to be "that innocent" any more. What is more surprising is that Angelica is also referred to with this same word, but the reasons seem to be different from her brothers', to start with her name, Angelica, which can also be linked to the profile-base relation within the word; i.e. the word *ch-**angel**-ing* entails a conceptual image within it, when making *angel* more salient as the profile. In Christian culture, angels are thought to be heavenly, innocent creatures that are part of the world encountered after death. Using the word "*changeling*", and bearing in mind that the word "*angel*" is embedded in it, it triggers scenarios combining frames related to "innocence", "children", "religious and folk beliefs" and "death." The two types of underspecification that come into play, implicitness and indetermination, are reinforced with visual evidence provided by the costume Angelica wears before and throughout the scene: the angel wings she wears supports what is subtly being expressed with the word. Following Daldry's interpretation of the text, this corroborates that Angelica's role, unlike her brothers, will be one of personification of "purity" and "innocence", and will have a relevant role in the scene. Opposing this image of purity, a parallel allegorical image will be symbolized by another winged element, the dead bird that has been found.

4.2. Conveying ideological standpoints

"We found a bird" said Quentin. The conceptual implications connected to the dead creature are also essential for the scene. What is found is a *bird*, not a bug, a mouse, or a butterfly. The semiotic chain angel-bird-death helps explain the permeation of iconic mappings that merge in the scene. The winged references, the angel and the bird, contribute to the construction of an ethereal setting that will easily invoke a metaphorical destination after death, heaven. In the exchange of information and worldviews from adult to child, underspecification is visibly present with very concise comments between Vanessa and the boys on this part of the scene, and between Virginia and Angelica on the second part of it.

Quentin: We might be able to save him.
Vanessa: Save him? I think you have to be careful, Quentin. There's a time to die, and it may be the bird's time...

Quentin's intention to urgently persuade Virginia to find a way to prevent the bird from dying establishes a starting point to discuss the conception of death; in Quentin's mind, death casts negative, terrible consequences that must be eluded; his idea of death matches the viewer's, one of fear and shock. Vanessa takes this opportunity to present her ideological standpoint. Vanessa's conceptual understanding of death is of total acceptance. Her astonishment by Quentin's (and probably the viewer's) reaction is a forceful way to counteract natural, typical belief. As expressed, her judgments condition not only Quentin's, but also the audience's thoughts using the deontic modal verb *have to* and the epistemic modal *may* (Fowler 1996:166). Vanessa's attitude towards death echoes the ideological views of the main characters in the movie, Virginia, Richard and Laura who, instead of opposing it, find themselves struggling between life and death in circumstances that seem to be uncontrollably driven away by a fate against which they are no longer willing to resist; as Ovarelli (2004:59) said "Quando le tre giornate saranno finite, […], avrà preso in considerazione la possibilità o l'impossibilità di un suicidio." The main characters, tired of enduring unbearable lives, embrace death to feel relieved of the agony of life, of solitude and isolation. Vanessa is not in similar situations, but the implications of Vanessa's words offer an objective context from a perspective for the audience to understand and believe.

Three thematic concepts *grass*, *grave* and *bed* interrelate as the dialogue unfolds towards the making of a grave for the dying bird. The conceptual frame that is generated adjusts the concepts modulating and aligning meaning with the topic of *death* and the *bird*. The grave is no longer "a hole that is dug" in order to place a coffin or corpse in. *Grass* is not usually present in the *death* frame, but it will add the necessary freshness and comfort to transform the grave into a "bed of grass", a deathbed for the bird to die on. On the last line, Julian evaluates the needs of the bird, requiring a restful place suitable to encounter death.

Julian: Come on. Let's pick some grass to make a grave.
Vanessa: Oh, Julian!
Julian: I'm just saying, he at least needs a bed to die on.

Once again, the need for the making of "*a bed to die on*" diverts the topic of death by minimizing the somberness of death and the destruction of life and profiling on

the need of comfort of an appropriate place to die. Parallel scenarios in the movie develop under the frame of the *deathbed*. Even though there is no spoken support on the excerpts, in the movie encountering death is presented as a peaceful, harmless act that must be no tragedy for the characters involved. The first, right at the start of the movie, begins with a prolepsis of a real biographic reference in which Virginia commits suicide walking into a river with her overcoat pockets full of stones to rest on the *riverbed*. This reference to the metaphorical use of water (Arranz 2013:117) as a voluntary choice to die, is also echoed with the "dream/vision" Laura has lying on the bed of an unknown hotel room just before her attempt to commit suicide. All of a sudden the room gets flooded with water. Langacker's (2008:83) coined the terms *reference point relationship* to refer to a particular kind of mental scanning with which speakers can "direct attention to a perceptually salient entity as a point of reference to help find some other entity". This way, water is converted into the conceptual trigger of "death as a voluntary action" and the deathbed becomes just the reference point invoked to create mental access to the target. In a sense, the only exception between the connection of water and death in the movie is the case of Richard, who commits suicide by jumping off a window. Even so, his acceptance of death and his destiny is absolute, when saying "*I don't think two people could've been happier than we've been.*" before killing himself.

4.3. Gender reference and death

When the bird is first referred to, there is a gender explicit reference with the use of pronouns *he* and *him* [gender: masculine], instead of *it*, which denotes a neutral reference gender for such a "lower animal". Generally, lower animals are characterized by neuter gender except when (Quirk 1986:92) "Gender in higher animals is chiefly observed by people with a special concern (*e.g.* with pets)". The gender issue surfaces when the pronouns *he* and *him* opportunistically draw attention to sex opposition revealing that the bird must actually be a "she-bird", rather than a "he-bird". Experienced readers will grasp a cultural allusion to change of sex not uncommon in Virginia Woolf's works, such as (ibid. 2006) *Orlando,* or the debate of sex ambiguity in her works (Barrett 1997, Haffey 2010). This is not the only allusion to sexual ambiguity in *The Hours*; there are other scenes with two women kissing one another or overt homosexual relations. Although the bird's scene does not depict a factual change of sex, the attention pattern focalizes on the gender adjustment.

Virginia: Do you think she'd like roses?
Angelica: Is it a "she"?
Virginia: Yes, the females are larger... and less colorful.

The gender insinuation opens the possibility of more direct conceptual mappings between the bird and Virginia, setting epistemic relations between them as a way to express Virginia's mind and feelings by means of what she says about the bird. If flowers are an iconic feature throughout the movie representing positive feelings, optimism, youth, and life (Patterson 2003:123-4), the scene exploits this by reducing it to a specific instance of flower, i.e. "yellow roses", said to symbolize jealousy in Victorian times. Is Daldry

suggesting Virginia's desire to die? The question "Do you think she'd like roses?" goes beyond the personal pronoun shift to the feminine-third-person. Despite the fact that the question is eventually left unanswered, it guides a certain type of intellectual reasoning when the concepts involved are conceptually blended (Fauconnier 2002). In fact, this type of underspecification involves *incompatibility* that needs be neutralized. The conflict rises when the bird, apart from being dead, is conceptualized as having specific human qualities. The question has complex implications when retrieving sensible meaning. Is Angelica supposed to know the answer about the bird's preferences? Or, are the girl's preferences about flowers what is solicited? This question cannot anticipate a direct answer about likes and dislikes in the human sense but suggests an opportunity to deliberate over death: it is *still* imperative to know if the bird is alleviated by what is made for the dead. If so, in Virginia's mind-set, and this seems to be like that with the rest of the characters, "death" is not an end in itself. Virginia approaches the concept of "death" and "what happens after death" in a simple but effective way. Being an inexperienced child, Angelica provides the best of milieus for Virginia to speak her mind.

Angelica: What happens when we die?
Virginia: What happens? ... We return to the place that we came from.
Angelica: I don't remember where I came from.
Virginia: Nor do I.

There are two related metaphors connected to the theme of death worth commenting in this fragment. As argued in Lakoff (2003: 89), it is clear that on many occasions we need more than one metaphor to define one same concept, every metaphor providing more accurate aspects to the idea as a whole. The conceptual metaphors DEATH AS A TRIP and, the related metaphor HEAVEN AS A PLACE, are combined to express one single idea. These underspecifications involve incompatibility that originates in the metaphoric use of the expressions. The concept of death appears to be presented not as an end in itself, but as a signpost to the future; death is conceptualized as resuming a previous 'existence'. The first of the metaphoric implications is found in the line "We return to the place that we came from." to convey the idea of death in terms of trip. As the line implies, "death" involves, "departing" or "advancing" from one state, "actual life", towards an alternative state metaphorically presented as a place "somewhere else." The conflict these expressions engender are examples of incompatibility (Radden 2007a:5) the viewers must reinterpret. For instance, the verb of movement 'return' requires an animate feature assigned to its trajector and an adverbial of place. Neither of them, the animate trajector or the adverbial of place are actual, or can be taken literally in the passage, when the trajector, which should be animate, is being referred to is *dead*. Similarly, the place cannot be literal; a place that cannot be described because "nobody remembers," and nobody can place it on a map. If this "place" were heaven, as metaphorically understood by religious belief, or it is "somewhere else" is not explicitly stated. It must be pointed out that such words like *heaven* or *hell* must have been expressly avoided for the conceptual and ideological (religious) implications these lexical

choices entangle. They also seem to have been discarded to be consistent with the character's ideology, in line with the previous use of the word "changeling", implicating folk culture, folk beliefs and superstitions, in opposition to more Christian religious beliefs. Both metaphors, DEATH AS A TRIP and HEAVEN AS A PLACE, (Lakoff, 2003:154) implicate some type of straightforward conceptualization of actuality after death. Once the existential fears have been soothed, the conversation between Virginia and Angelica focuses on the physical consequences of death. They comment on the bird's lying on the grave that has been prepared for it.

Angelica: She looks very small.
Virginia: Yes...yes, that's one of the things that happen... We look smaller.
Angelica: But very peaceful.

The audience's attention shifts towards the physical changes death brings about on the body, conceptualized as the container of the soul. Even though they are not made explicit, the words "that's one of the things that happen..." indicate that there may be other related manifestations. It is suggested that, after death, the body becomes a hollow container, which can be used no more. The response to Virginia's words is headed by the adjective, "peaceful". The short answer stresses the magnitude of the thought Angelica is impressed with: the approach to death as the relief of all the suffering of life and the relief of the feeling of solitude and isolation the characters in the movie are willing to escape from.

After this point, Vanessa and the boys get back causing terrible fuss and completely unaware of the transcendental experience Angelica and Virginia have had. The closing part prepares the next scene reminding Virginia of her daily problems.

Vanessa: Is it done? Have you finished? Is the bird funeral complete?
Virginia: Yes.
Vanessa: Oh, well then. Are we to be denied tea altogether for coming so early?

Some intention of irony can be perceived in the way the question "Are we to be denied tea altogether for coming so early?" is asked. The reference to the fragile relationship Virginia has in the movie with the rest of the world, and the servants in the house in particular, already dealt with in other scenes is made more prominent. Virginia considers the problems with the servants trivial, mundane minutiae compared with the dimension of her responsibilities towards Mrs Dalloway, the fiction character she is developing as a writer, and the struggle the characters in the novel have between life and death. Both sides intermingle in Virginia's dual perception of life: her own actual life, a complete mess in which she has got to be looked after by her husband, and Mrs Dalloway's life, the main character's life on the book she is writing at the moment. Mrs Dalloway's fate depends entirely on her, and it is only in fiction where Virginia is strong enough to continue living. The structure "to be + infinitive" and the verb *deny* Vanessa uses in the last question relaxes the tone of formal solemnity as an ironical reproach with the objective of making the line sound ridiculous.

5. Conclusion

The analysis offers sufficient evidence to determine that the scene is more than a strategy to tame the gloomy atmosphere of previous scenes. In fact, it has the potential of an ideological booster. The usage event contains a variety of linguistic, and non-linguistic, cues from which meaning may be constructed. This new setting scene recreates an alternative scenario in which ideological positions are discussed. Behind the apparent normality, the disturbing death of a bird generates an imbalance between the participant attitudes, adults and children, in the exchange. Adult convictions and attitudes related to death sound more of an imposition than a mere exchange of viewpoints. For this, it can be argued that the scene is a vehicle to instil very deeply assumed metaphorical conceptions about life and death. The choice of a young girl to act allegorically as 'innocence' creates the best of milieus for the adult characters to speak their minds from an influential position that is projected towards the children and, indirectly, towards the audience. If, at first, approaching death as something traumatic is sensible to the children, and probably to the audience, Vanessa and Virginia's comments enforce the conceptualization of death as a quotidian event that has to be accepted and assumed.

About the construction of meaning, the analysis shows that the potential meaning that can be retrieved from the excerpt originates from different sources and at various levels. One of the sources is language, collaborating at morphological, lexical, sentential and discourse levels; others are visual or auditory sources, which send additional, non-linguistic, messages to intensify intended meanings. Decoding and conceptualizing all this is not easy. In movies, the sequences of events develop at a brisk pace and the viewers must collect tremendous amounts of information with very limited, or no time for reflection. Lots of information will be stored unprocessed, or processed unconsciously, other information will go unnoticed to some viewers and will eventually be lost. As explained in the methodological section, the results of the analyses cannot be taken as what audiences will consciously infer while watching the movie, since most of what is described requires careful consideration. However, the audience is exposed to all of it and, more or less consciously, and some of what is present will be recruited. Beyond the viewer's control, minute, marginally perceptible meaningful units will cumulate in the viewers' minds ready to participate in the construction of the abstract universe the scene will be converted into. From the diffuse array of potential units of meanings, only part of it, different for every individual, will surface to be tested for appropriateness in specific contexts. Other chunks of potential meanings will be overlooked, remain unnoticed, or stored unprocessed in case they should be needed in later processing. In movie watching, the mind works intuitively and, although it is very difficult to isolate mental inferences, viewers will be conditioned to follow analogous inference paths using more than one modality and by providing more than one cue to concur pointing at the same conceptual idea. Being all this so, meaning has to adapt constantly depending on the new occurrences that interact in the communication event. Since the viewers' minds have to backtrack new visual and linguistic information with old information in their inferences, the construction of meaning cannot be linear and must keep reprocessing on-line after cropping every new item of information. Viewers will construct hypothesis of what it is happening and can never stop assessing and

reassessing alternative possible ways of making sense of the cues they have available. The complexity is enormous and very dynamic. But like pebbles on a beach, it will be the panoramic view of the beach that will generate approximate abstract conceptual images of what the scene adds to the whole movie. But, although every pebble performs a determinant function as part of the beach, a holistic approach to meaning must be taken into consideration. Individual units of signification taken in isolation only collaborate as part of an indivisible whole, whose aesthetic, ideological, or critical potential power will always transcend individual components.

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