ELSEVIER

Journal of Pragmatics 35 (2003) 149–154

journal of PRAGMATICS

www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma

Book review

Intentions in the Experience of Meaning
Raymond J. Gibbs, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, vii + 414 pages, paperback, $23.00

Sometimes the interpretation of a literary text seems a kind of game. Provided the rules that the critic adopts are rational and explicable, and can be made to apply to a significant proportion of the text, the text can be made to bear any interpretation that the critic chooses. Raymond Gibbs cites a particularly striking example, that of Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club*, as reported by Tan herself. The interpretation was offered in a master's thesis, whose author "noted I had often used the number four, something on the order of 32 or 36 times, in any case a number divisible by four. Accordingly, she pointed out, there were four mothers, four daughters, four sections of the book, four stories per section." Moreover, "my use of the number four was a symbol for the four stages of psychological development which corresponded in uncanny ways with the four stages of some kind of Buddhist philosophy I have never heard of before". Not surprisingly, Tan rejects such a view of her novel, and in retrospect sees her overuse of the number four "to be a flaw" (pp. 236–237).

Yet, even if the author dismisses such an interpretation, we have ample warrant for circumventing her conscious claims about the novel. We can, for example, suppose an underlying concordance between her unconscious understanding and the Buddhist philosophy that she claims not to know. Indeed, this might make the philosophy seem all the more impressive, like the Oedipus complex: "Look, you were under the influence of the philosophy without even being aware of it!" Literary interpretation frequently presents us with such arguments, beginning, perhaps, with Blake's well known claim that in depicting Satan in *Paradise Lost* Milton was of the devil's party without knowing it. How are we to assess such claims?

In *Intentions* Gibbs discusses the history of literary interpretation, from the New Critical interdiction of appeals to intention in criticism, to the recent hypertext theorist's dispersal of the author across the links of intertextuality. Such dismissals of the author are untenable for Gibbs, who suggests that we persistently make suppositions about intention in order to understand discourse, whether written or spoken. Gibbs rehearses some of the principal arguments about how intention is deployed, and shows that the problem of dealing with intention relates to some fundamental problems over how language is understood, and how the processes of interpretation unfold. Gibbs's own position, which he states in several different places in the book,

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PII: S0378-2166(02)00052-8

is based on what he calls "the cognitive intentionalist premise", which supposes that in order to understand language we cannot remain at the level of linguistic meaning but must appeal to what a speaker or writer may have intended (p. 111). While spoken communication provides a range of clues about what a speaker intends, ensuring that meaning is developed collaboratively, the process of understanding written language is more problematic. Here, rather than seek to establish what a particular author actually meant, Gibbs prefers the position that what we seek to understand is what the author is likely to have meant. This is what Gibbs calls hypothetical intentionality (p. 262). In addition, Gibbs also underlines in several places that understanding is a temporal process, and that we should be alert to the particular stage at which ascriptions of intention occur. Do these positions help to arbitrate the problem demonstrated by Amy Tan and the ubiquitous number four?

Gibbs divides the book into five parts, although parts one and five consist of only one chapter each, the Introduction and the Conclusion. Most of the first half of the book (part 2 and the first two chapters of part 3) examine intentions in various behavioural and conversational situations. But Gibbs raises more questions than he is able to answer. He argues, correctly I believe, that people automatically ascribe intention to speech and behaviour (p. 71), even though the act of doing so may sometimes be mistaken. He cites the example of Joseph Weizenbaum's ELIZA (pp. 72–75), a computer program that appeared to exercise intentionality. It was able to adopt the role of a Rogerian analyst and successfully hold a therapeutic "conversation" (driven by some clever rules of thumb). The disposition to infer intention is probably more powerful than Gibbs suggests, and may be based on much less information than ELIZA provides. Gibbs mentions one study in which random patterns of moving dots on film were presented to people: almost every participant decribed the movement of the dots in intentional terms. Some dots "chased", while others "followed" (p. 75). The evolutionary significance of such a tendency seems clear: impute intention to a moving object until it proves to be either harmless or unmotivated. Thus, it seems all the more essential for our encounters with other people that intention will be foremost in governing understanding. But does this conclusion extend to written discourse?

Gibbs himself emphasizes several times that intention must occur early in the process of comprehension (e.g., pp. 233, 358). He speculates that during the temporal process of reading "Recovery of authorial intentions ... might be essential in earlier cognitive processes of interpretation, but not later products of understanding" (p. 99). Thus critics who deny the role of intention are referring to a later phase of understanding, and this "makes an unwarranted inference about an early process of understanding" (p. 103). But, oddly, no studies are cited in support of this claim. While it has been shown that people judge statements to be meaningful more rapidly when supposedly written by a person than by a computer, this finding does not help us to locate intention among the first few milliseconds or seconds of verbal processing (pp. 103–104). Empirical studies, as Magliano and Graesser (1991) showed, have not only provided no substantial evidence whether authorial intent is inferred early in the comprehension process, we cannot yet determine whether such inference is automatic (obligatory) or strategic (contingent on the reader's situation

or goals), although the former seems the best guess. Gibbs argues that "Many aspects of intentional understanding lie within our unconscious minds and are not easily understood by conscious introspection alone" (p. 98); but, again, this proposal is not supported by empirical study.

One study cited by Gibbs is suggestive, however. With Kerry Pfaff, Gibbs examined student readers' responses to *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* by James Garner, which satirizes current values by rewriting familiar fairy tales. In reading and commenting on the stories line by line, readers showed their awareness of the author and of his intentions (p. 200). It is easier to see, in this context, why authorial intent would play a role: satire, as theorists such as Northrop Frye have pointed out, projects a norm or standard (an implicit goodness of behaviour, for instance, by which to judge manifestly bad or absurd behaviour), thus inviting a complicity with the author, a shared perspective. While this study is not the conclusive evidence for authorial intentions in reading that Gibbs suggests (p. 201), it does point to a more general mechanism for projections of authorial intention. In a study of response to narrative by Russ Hunt and Doug Vipond (1986), it was found that "discourse evaluations" attracted the particular attention of readers: these were passages in which a certain expression stood out against the local norms of the text. For instance, instead of saying that visitors "sat around the room", the narrator refers to them as "camped around the room". Terms such as "camped" project an attitude on the part of the narrator, just as satire projects the alternative, "correct" view of its author. Without decoding the narrator's attitude, the story cannot effectively be understood.

While intentions inferred from discourse evaluations, strictly speaking, should be attributed to the implied rather than the actual author, in practice readers are not likely to make such a discrimination unless the narrative requires it (as the tongue in cheek *Bedtime Stories* do). As Peter Dixon and Marisa Bortolussi (1996) suggested, in a study that examined readers' understanding of narrators, the reader's "first-order" relationship is likely to be with the narrator, whereas "second-order" inferences about the author may only be drawn by more sophisticated readers (i.e., author intent may be a strategic inference). Their study found clear evidence that readers attributed intent to narrators, with free indirect discourse being the most effective agent for signalling the narrator's attitude towards characters, the mode that invited readers to share the narrator's attitude. As a result, readers saw the narrator as like the character.

The use of the satirical mode, discourse evaluations, or free indirect discourse, each seems to enable, perhaps even require, readers to infer intention. This points to the importance of formal features of a literary text for intentionality (probably those features that evoke feeling in readers, as studies of our own have suggested: Miall and Kuiken, 1998). In this perspective, the noticing of occurrences of "four" for Amy Tan's reader was perhaps inescapable, a formal feature that conveyed some intimations of intention. This would count as an obligatory inference. The ensuing Buddhist interpretation, on the other hand, must be considered strategic, an outcome of that particular reader's situation, knowledge, and prior commitments (and one that, like Amy Tan, we might find improbable).

In the second half of the book Gibbs considers intention in art. Discussion is mainly devoted to the various theoretical accounts of literary theorists, although some sections are given to considering avant garde art, improvised dance, and film, while one chapter is devoted to intention in legal interpretation. Given that written language, compared with spoken, lacks immediate context, Gibbs asks whether the inferring of intention is bound to occur. Gibbs points out that it is quite possible for a reader to come across a sentence on an anonymous piece of paper, such as "Whales eat plankton", and understand it apparently without reference to any possible intention on the part of its author (p. 176). Oddly, while Gibbs wishes to reject this possibility, he overlooks one well established feature of language that would support his position. Almost all sentences can be analysed into given and new components (Clark and Haviland, 1977), and in this respect the given component, "Whales", assumes common knowledge on the part of author and reader. What is new here is the information about plankton. I might remark, for instance, "I thought they ate fish". From this a reader necessarily infers what the author of the sentence believes the reader to know. Extending beyond this simple example, we can see all written language fulfilling the given-new contract, thus projecting a view of what an author knows and, implicitly, what the aims of the author must be in informing us as readers. A text thus determines a good deal about the context in which a reader is intended to construe it. Normally, however, as Gibbs points out, texts are generally encountered in situations where a good deal of information is available to infer the intentions of the author, from notes on fridge magnets to a newspaper published in a particular city.

Gibbs reviews a number of theoretical positions on intention, and raises some of the more challenging cases. Does it matter who Shakespeare was? Or that the author of *The Education of Little Tree* was not a native American (p. 209)? Why should we care if a fake Rembrandt painting is indistinguishable from a genuine one? That most of us do care suggests that aesthetic value or meaning alone is insufficient to authorize our responses: we must feel ourselves in an unequivocal relationship to an originating author. But Gibbs goes on to show how this notion has itself been called into question: he considers the recent rejection of the so-called romantic myth of single authorship, of originary creative genius, which he attributes to writers such as Wordsworth and Keats (p. 216). He notes that this has been challenged, mentioning examples of texts written collaboratively (*Frankenstein*, *The Waste Land*, pp. 217–218), although he does not refer to Jerome McGann, the scholar of Romanticism who has been the most influential theorist in challenging the single authorship view. In line with such theorists Gibbs declares "The demise of the illusion that authorship is a solitary and originary activity" (p. 220), but the situation is not as clear as this might seem. At the same time that McGann gained prominence, a group of Wordsworth scholars began publishing the Cornell edition of his works, which by extensive reproduction of Wordsworth's manuscripts has fostered close attention to Wordsworth's first thoughts as a poet. In Romanticism, at least, following this example it has now become common to publish the first print or manuscript version of a text rather than the last (e.g., Wu, 1994), a procedure that often undercuts the emphasis on collaborative authoring and foregrounds an author's first intentions.

But Gibbs's position is not consistent. Having endorsed multiple authorship, he later recommends the position, as he terms it, of subjective intentionalism, the view "that an author's successfully realized intentions determine a text's meaning" (p. 241). This authorizes recourse to a writer's letters, journals, and other works to help establish a context for interpretation. This approach, says Gibbs, "is closest in spirit to the traditional view in cognitive science that linguistic understanding is ultimately aimed at recovering what a speaker or writer intended to communicate" (pp. 244–245). Yet this cannot constrain interpretation, which may be "potentially endless," allowing readers to construct "their own interpretations of what is written" (p. 245). It is a position that opens the door to the Buddhist interpretation of Amy Tan, as well as a range of recent critical approaches (feminist, historicist, etc.) that impute intentions to authors beyond any purpose the author might have contemplated: in Gibbs words, "some wonderful, although empirically speculative, ideas about how literary criticism can illuminate hidden forces at work in the creation of texts" (p. 251). Intentionalist criticism, for example, now allows "unintended meanings that readers can reasonably ascribe to the author as a member of a class" (p. 263). This would include such studies of Wordsworth as that of Marjorie Levinson (1986), who faults "Tintern Abbey" because Wordsworth fails to mention the iron works and polluted river he surely must have seen when walking the banks of the River Wye in 1798 (implying his complicity with the ruling class).

Thus we are no closer to resolving the larger issues raised by the Amy Tan example. Gibbs's preferred approach, that of "hypothetical intentionalism," proposes that "people find language and artworks meaningful without necessarily knowing the actual beliefs and intentions of the person(s) creating the artifact." At most, interpretation is constrained by "an understanding of the conditions under which the artifact was created" (p. 328). But this allows critics to impute conditions to the genesis of texts whether from psychoanalytic, Marxist, feminist, or any other congenial theory of (usually unconscious) intentions—a position that leaves us no closer to a theory of intention that would constrain interpretation. Gibbs's reviews of intention theories are engaging and often productive, and the examples he discusses are frequently well chosen and entertaining. But the clarity and rigour that appears to be promised by the "cognitive intentionalist premise" is not realized. The book leaves the problems of intentionalism much where it found them.

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