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A Pragmatic Study of Speech Acts in the Novel "*Jazz*" by Toni Morrison

A thesis

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> If there are some critics who still doubt the competence of linguistics to embrace the field of poetics, I privately believe that … linguists have been mistaken for an inadequacy of the linguistic science itself. All of us here, however, definitely realize that a linguist deaf to the poetic function of language and a literary scholar indifferent to linguistic problems and conversant with linguistic methods are equally flagrant anachronisms (Jacobson, 1960, p. 377).

The Russian critical linguist underscores the integration between linguistics and literature to provide a synergistic relationship: to interpret linguistic markers in terms of "literariness" and to interpret literary devices in terms of linguistic analysis.

2.1 Morrison's Postcolonial Style

The inspiration for this chapter comes from R. Carter's (1995) definition of a practical stylistic approach as a "process of literary text analysis which starts from a basic assumption that the primary interpretative procedures used in the readings of a literary text are linguistic procedures" (p. 4).

Regarding 'Style and Stylistics', Moses Ayeomoni (2006) refers to the "amorphous" nature of style "because it could be viewed from several perspectives thus having innumerable definitions" (p. 545). Style is concerned with the artful expression of idea. Amorphous here means a Jellyfish term, has more than one definition and more than one approach. About style, Abrams (2001) shows:

> Style is the linguistic expression in prose or verse – it is how speakers or writers say whatever it is they say. The style of a particular work or writer has been analyzed in terms of the characteristic modes of its diction, or choices of words, its sentence structure and syntax; the density and types of its figurative language; the patterns of its rhythm, component sounds, and other formal features; and its rhetorical claims and devices (p. 203).

Thus, stylistic choices can be phonological, morphological, syntactic, or semantic, and style is the deployment of meaning or its linguistic aspects to convey a meaning, and generate an interpretation in a literary text. This enhances the belief advocated by Gluysenaar (1979) that stylistics can help "to make more concise and more describable, delicate interactions of form and meaning" (p. 9).

Roger Fowler (1996) states that "stylistics adopts theoretical ideas and analytical techniques from linguistics with a view to studying literary texts" (p.11). Moreover, Birch (1989) remarks that "stylistics is not an independent discipline with its own specific vocabulary and techniques but an integration of a number of interests drawn mainly from linguistic and literary concepts" (p. 5).

Furthermore, according to Widdowson (1975), stylistics is a scientific study of literary interpretation from "a linguistic orientation" (p. 3). Style also refers to "what is distinctive" as Chaika (1994) argues: "speakers give a great deal of information about themselves just by the words, grammar and pronunciation they choose both consciously and unconsciously" (p. 84). In this sense, Hodge (1990) believes that style is 'individual' (p. 77). He also remarks that the "style of some writers is deliberately so unique that it defines the individual writer like a signature". An illustrating

example is that of Toni Morrison's (1987) postcolonial style that is marked by what she terms a "literary archaeology" of the lives of African Americans (p. 112).

By scrutinizing thematic structures in literary discourses, it is possible to gain access to what the author consciously or subconsciously endeavors to convey in a coherent way. The more the style is symbolic and abstract, the more it becomes provocative and sophisticated. For example, the temptation to 'rediscover' an innocent past can lead to the construction of a mythic past which can be constraining rather than liberating. Instead, as Homi Bhabha (1994) says:

> What is theoretically innovative and politically crucial is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood- singular or communal- that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself (p.1).

Black writers function within a discourse which defines them as absent, not white, or as present, the 'other'. Women writers function within a discourse which defines them as absent, not male, or as present, the 'other'. An exploration of the possibilities of self-perception is an empowering act to reveal how complex or transient any 'truth' is as Norma Alarcon (1990) strongly emphasizes, "The psychic and material violence that gives shape to that [black female subjectivity] cannot be underestimated nor passed over lightly" (p. 359). The use of the **representative** act of *describing* is highly used in Morrison's description of black women. She says: Black

women were armed, black women were dangerous and the less money they had the deadlier the weapon they chose (*Jazz*, 1992, p.77). Morrison's psychological and physical description of the black women underscores their struggle and resistance to deconstruct form of binary oppositions.

Morrison's novels (1989) can be regarded as subversive discourse (to break binary oppositions and deconstruct stereotypical representations) of rupture and disruption since they disrupt the narratives. They produce a place where "unspeakable things and thoughts, unspoken" (p. 284). Morrison's writing interrogates and reveals the historical fictions and powerful myths which have formed negative images constructed around black women and men identities. Morrison weaves her characters into a web of history entangled within discourses of class, 'race', gender and sexuality. Morrison's writing articulates the survival and destruction of black female and male subjects within a racist and patriarchal culture. She dramatizes constructions of femininity, maternity, masculinity and sexuality in racist discourse. She also uses the **directive** speech act of *ordering* and belonging, naming and memory, myth and re-memory in an exploration of African American cultural identity. Morrison's novels interpret and de-construct the past in order to create the possibility of being able to construct the future.

Kobena Mercer (1992) emphasizes that Morrison's novel, *Jazz* advocates not just memory but "re-memory", as "roots" are being used to find "routes out of the prison house of marginality" (p. 38). Morrison's postcolonial style weaves dynamically music and literature, past and modernity, Harlem and the South, multiple voices, socio-political and cultural atmosphere of resistance of the early 20th century. In her essay

"Memory, Creation, and Writing," Morrison (1987) offers a paradigm for what could be called a black aesthetic:

> If my work is to faithfully reflect the aesthetic tradition of Afro-American culture, it must make conscious use of the characteristics of its art forms and translate them into print: antiphony, the group nature of art, its functionality, its improvisational nature, its relationship to audience performance, the critical voice which upholds tradition and communal values and which also provides occasion for an individual to transcend and defy group restrictions (p. 389).

According to the memory and the past, Joe begins to remember his eighteen-year girl, Dorcas in his past:

> Now he lies in bed remembering every detail of that October afternoon when he first met her, from start to finish, and over and over. Not just because it is tasty, but because he is trying to sear her into his mind, brand her there against future wear. (*Jazz*, 1992, p.28)

The whole quotation, which represents an expressive act of *imagination*, provides an instance of the memories of Dorcas being more precious (and tastier) than Dorcas herself. When Dorcas died, she was Joe's ex, but in his memory of her, she can be his for eternity.

In Morrison's *Jazz* (1992), hair becomes important within the politics of race:

> [He was named] Golden because after the pink birth-skin disappeared along with the down on his head, his flesh was radiantly golden and floppy yellow curls covered his head and the lobes of his ears. It was nowhere as blond as Vera Louise's hair once was, but its sunlight colour, its determined curliness, endeared him to her. Not all at once. It took a while. But True Belle laughed out loud the minute

> she saw him and thereafter every day for eighteen years. (p. 139)

The character 'Golden' is born in 1870 or thereabouts, his light skin and blond hair mean that his mother, Vera Louise, decides to transform into a white subject. This is due to the fact that being unmarried and she tells her new neighbors that her son is an orphan upon whom she received from all pity.

His black color is evidence of his black father (and her breaking of a taboo) worries his mother, who shares the secret only with her maid, True Belle. When he is told his genealogy, at the age of eighteen, Golden reevaluates his experiences and his understanding of the ways in which people can be racially categorized: "he had always thought there was only one kind ... But there was another kind-like himself"(p.149). Golden ruminates on True Belle's care for him as in *Jazz* (1992):

> The woman who cooked and cleaned for Vera Louise; who sent baskets of plum preserves, ham and loaves of bread every week while he was in boarding school; who gave his frayed shirts to rag-and-bone men rather than let him wear them; the woman who smiled and shook her head every time she looked at him. Even when he was a tiny boy with a head swollen with fat champagne-coloured curls, and ate the pieces of cake she held out to him, her smile was more amusement than pleasure. When the two of them, the white woman and the cook, bathed him they sometimes passed anxious looks at the palms of his hand, the texture of his drying hair (pp. 148-149).

The fear communicated between the two women's glances drives them to transform him into a new identity. Vera Louis dresses Golden 'like the Prince of Wales', in embroidered underwear bearing his initial, waistcoats

with ivory buttons and expensive shirts, which are signifiers of a privilege that in that era would have marked Golden out as white.

When Golden eventually arrives home, he presumes his father's, he meets a boy, called Honor, who has come to tend to the stock. Honor,

> would have said 'Morning' although it wasn't, but he thought the man lurching down the steps was white and not to be spoken to without leave ... 'Hello' said the drunken gent, and if the black boy doubted for a minute whether he was white, the smileless smile that came with the greeting convinced him (*Jazz*, 1992, pp. 155- 156).

In contrast, this smileless smile marks the performance of whiteness. Morrison gives us the smile of the black train conductor that relaxes his performance of blackness. He reaches the carriage that carries True Belle's granddaughter, Violet, and her future husband, Joe, to the city; he was "pleasant but unsmiling now that he did not have to smile in this car full of coloured people", those with whom he did not have to "lace his dignity with a smile" (*Jazz*,1992, pp. 30-31). His blackness is performed, then, only for the benefit of those that are categorized (by the spatial dimensions of segregated train compartments) as white.

The formation of the African-American self in Morrison's *Jazz* is manifested in an ambiguous narrator, traumatized characters, and a fragmented storyline. *Jazz* blends voices, spaces and times within the narration of the first-person anonymous narrator who passes judgments on the characters, yet he acts as an impersonal narrator at other times. Violet and Joe Trace, the two main characters in this novel, exemplify the confusion of self-formation in a white, racist society according to Black women's identities and the politics of displacement

Violet's construction of herself depends on her ability to resist the dominant discourses of beauty and felicity, which had been planted in her psyche since her girlhood. Joe gains his self-identity by remembering his fragmentary past experiences and finally coming to terms with the "routes" he has taken in his life. The late middle-aged heroine, Violet is confused by her dual self—she is split into a crazy "Violent" and a sane but weary "Violet.". The **declaration** speech act enhances the understanding of the self-violet, that is, Violet mistakenly thought to be Violet: "Violent they call her now" (*Jazz*, 1992, p.75). **Declaration** Speech Act, as Kreider (1998) states, promotes the act of *naming*. Morrison adopts a new technique of telescoping the split- personality. Violet recovers her lost self by destroying the violence in herself. She is nicknamed "Violent" after she invades Dorcas' funeral to dishonor the girl's face with a knife.

The splitting of the self-springs from Violet's internalization of her grandmother's stories of Golden Grey, which reproduces the dominant discourses about skin color and the standard of beauty. Near the end of the story, Violet tells Felice (a teen-aged girl and is Dorcas' best friend) how harmful her internalization of the perfect image of Golden Grey is to her:

> My grandmother fed me stories about a little blond child. He was a boy, but I thought of him as a girl sometimes, as a brother, sometimes as a boyfriend. He lived inside my mind. Quiet as a mole. But I didn't know it till I got here. The two of us. Had to get rid of it (*Jazz*, 1992, p. 208).

In *Playing in the Dark*: *Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Morrison investigates what she calls "American Africanism." She explores how an Africanist "presence or persona" has been constructed in supposedly white-dominated American literature. The silenced Africanist

presence, as Morrison points out, manifests itself "in the rhetoric of dread and desire," serving to define the white self. Morrison's novels are attempts to construct a cultural counter-discourse to American Africanism. Like the writers of the **Black Aesthetic Movement,** the term "Black Aesthetic" can be traced back to the Black Arts Movement 'BAM' of the late 1960s and early 1970s. As an intellectual movement that symbolizes the awakening spirit of the Negroes, "Black Aesthetic" used to describe works of art, literature, poetry, music, and theater that centralized black life and culture. Therefore, Morrison strove to deconstruct the stereotypes of blacks to represent authentic black "realities".

2.2 *Jazz*: A Musical Signifier of Cultural Identity

In a 1996 interview with Hackney, Morrison claims that Jazz music is a manifestation of romanticism that is dramatized most strongly through the central love story (or stories). Within the romanticism paradigm, she illustrates the true-to-life story in which an eighteen-year-old girl (who becomes Dorcas in the novel) insists on allowing the ex-lover who shots her to (Joe Trace in the novel) get away. The girl, not unlike Dorcas, eventually has bled to death, having told no one who fired the shots.

Morrison comments on her initial reactions to this story saying "That seemed to me, when I first heard it, since she was only eighteen years old, so romantic and so silly, but young, so young. It is the quality of romance, misguided but certainly intense, that seems to feed into the music of that period" (p. 6). She continues, "I was convinced that that reckless romantic emotion was part and parcel of an opportunity snatched to erase the past in which one really didn't have all those choices, certainly not the choices of

love" (p.6). Therefore, Morrison uses a **representative** act of assertion when she says “I” to refer to the identity of the Black women.

Referring to the character of Dorcas, Morrison writes, "I wanted this young girl to have heard all that music, all the speakeasy music, and to be young and in the city and alive and daring and rebellious" (p.6). The Black writers, e.g., Langston Hughes (1902-1967) and Nella Larsen (1891-1964) associate Jazz with the new urban experience while blues is related to the rural life and the pastiness of the past. The Jazz-blues dichotomy signifies Morrison’s upward mobility since Jazz was the foundation of the commercial recording industry in the U.S.

Jazz has been a symbol of the democracy since it teaches democratic values. Envisioning *Jazz* as the "new," day black art ("Rootedness", Morrison, 1984, p. 340), Morrison creates an art form to reclaim the gathering of the black subjects dynamically to reflect the African American imagination and black experience in general. Rodriguez (1993) expands upon this idea that Morrison creates an art to reclaim the gathering or union of the black subjects to dynamically reflect the African-American imagination and the whole black experience in general. Rodriguez (1993) points out:

> In *Jazz*, Morrison transposes into another medium the music that sprang out of her people and expressed their joys, their sorrows, their beliefs, their psyche. This music--spirituals, blues, ragtime, Jazz-has spread throughout the world in our time, and is no longer uniquely or exclusively African-American. There's need now, suggests Morrison, to make fiction do what the music used to do, tell the whole wide world the ongoing story of her people (p. 736).

Thus, in her novel *Jazz*, Morrison attempts to recreate the notion of togetherness nourished by Jazz, a genre of music that, according to Berret (1989), "presupposes a village atmosphere" and "urges participation by all the senses" (p. 270).

Writer and musician Ralph Ellison (1972) embraces such a multi-cultural, understanding of *Jazz* in his writings. Paraphrasing Ellison's ideas, Berndt Ostendorf (1986) writes the following:

> *Jazz* is the only pure American cultural creation, which, shortly after its birth, became America's most important cultural export"; it is, moreover, "a hybrid, a creole, a fusion of heterogenous dialogues from folk traditions of blacks and whites" (p. 165).

Ralph Ellison (1972) explicates the complicated relationship between self and others in his famous observation about the novel, *Jazz*

> true *Jazz* is an art of individual assertion within and roup. Each true *Jazz* moment (as distinct from the uninspired commercial performance) springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition (p. 234).

In *Jazz* (1992), Violet's relationship with the urban black community is a signifier of her adaptation to the Jazz music. In the beginning of the novel, the ill-accommodated Violet strives to win back her husband by imitating "the dance steps the dead girl used to do" (p. 5). However, her imitation is awkward, disgusting, and ridiculous: "It was like watching an old street

pigeon pecking the crust of a sardine sandwich the cats left behind" (ibid. p. 6).

At that moment she is at odds with the urban black community—she is a social outcast who has stumbled into "cracks" once in a while. Unable to internalize in the musical discourse, she could not really integrate into the Jazz milieu. However, after she has exonerated the racist discourses implicit in the stories of Golden Grey and vowed to be her own black self, she is able to integrate into the Jazz milieu and thereby reconcile with her husband. Felice witnesses the scene:

> Somebody in the house across the alley put a record on and the music floated in to us through the open window. Mr. Trace moved his head to the rhythm and his wife snapped her fingers in time. She did a little step in front of him and he smiled. By and by they were dancing. Funny, like old people do, and I laughed for real. Not because of how funny they looked. Something in it made me feel I shouldn't be there. Shouldn't be looking at them doing that (*Jazz* 1992, p. 214).

Through their bodily participation in music, Violet and Joe assimilate themselves into an urban black community, constructing their cultural/black identity. As they interact with the black community within the musical framework they also communicate and reconcile with each other.

In his close analysis of *Jazz*, Eusebio Rodrigues (1993) comments not only on the presence of repetition but also on the effects of punctuation and rhyme within Morrison's prose. In one of the passages, Rodrigues writes that, the novel's narrator *describes* Alice's aversion to Jazz music: "It faked happiness, faked welcome, but it did not make her feel generous, this juke

joint, barrel hooch, music. It made her [furious] for doing what it did and did and did to her" (p. 59). The narrator's *description* of the Jazz music is an act of **Representative** speech act as exemplified in the quote below:

> Up there, in that part of the city, which is the part, they came for the right tune whistled in the doorway or lifting up from the circles and grooves of a record can change the weather. From freezing to hot to cool. (*Jazz*, 1992, p.51)

This speech act underscores the beauty of Jazz music that totally breaks all musical rules. It can be sad and makes one weep and it can be powerful and sexy.

The use of **representatives** underlies two pivotal points. First, representatives function as a story-telling act undertaken or performed by the protagonists who is in *Jazz* Joe Trace and his wife Violet. Second, representatives enhance *description* of characters to create a mood or an atmosphere as seen in Paula Gallant Eckhard's identification of the *Jazz* as the novel's narrator

> Like a *Jazz* performance, [the narrator] creates a montage effect in its story-telling. It improvises on itself, utilizes the language of music and syncopated rhythms, and sings classic blues ;themes of love and loss [….] Music, language, and narrative come together in *Jazz*, and their interplay provides the real dynamics of the text (p. 11).

Here, **representatives** have the power to strengthen the vitality of explanation, description and emphasis.

The most important function of Jazz in this novel, as many critics have indicated, is Morrison's manipulation of the *Jazz* structure to the narrative. Henry Louis Gates (1993), for instance, sheds light on the importance of the Jazz structure in Morrison's novel: "while many black writers have

used musicians and music as theme and metaphor for their writing, none have attempted to draw upon Jazz as the structuring principle for an entire novel" (p. 52). The Jazzifying structure of *Jazz* thereby enhances fragmentary, circular, and repetitive narration as well as leads to an ambiguous and self-deconstructing narrator.

2.3The Black Female Voice: A Signifier of Self-Displacement

Focusing on the notion of the displacement of the self, Morrison, in a recent interview, she inquires: "What is it that compels a good woman to displace the self, herself?" Romantic love, Morrison's novel suggests, may be the source of this displacement of the female self. Although both Violet and Joe suffer from displacement, its manifestations are different. Violet suffers from double consciousness. She is both *this* Violet and *that* Violet, the one called Violent. She is both the subject of her life and an observer, when *that* Violet takes charge and she is unable to reunite the two parts. As Felice explains when she and Dorcas used to make up love scenes and describe them to each other: "It was fun and a little smutty. Something about it bothered me though. Not the loving stuff, but the picture I had of myself when I did it, nothing like me" (pp. 208-09). This quote is an **expressive** act of *liking* herself. Violet expresses, "the picture I had of myself when I did it, nothing like me"

Jazz illustrates how romantic love, which is rooted in childhood, becomes a structure of domination and displacement of self and, more perniciously, how it can become a structure for destruction of the female self. For all three main characters, Joe, Violet, and Dorcas, the object of each person's desire is rooted in an unconscious yearning for and memory