



*“this unique distance from isolation”:*

## **A stylistic analysis of Larkin's 'Talking in Bed'**

**Bahaa-Eddin M. Mazid, Ph. D.\***

\*. (Lecturer of Linguistics, Dept. of English, Faculty of Arts,  
Sohag, South Valley University)

### *1. Introduction*

#### **Talking in Bed**

- 1. Talking in bed ought to be easiest,**
- 2. Lying together there goes back so far,**
- 3. An emblem of two people being honest.**
  
- 4. Yet more and more time passes silently.**
- 5. Outside, the wind's incomplete unrest**
- 6. Builds and disperses clouds in the sky,**
  
- 7. And dark towns heap up on the horizon.**
- 8. None of this cares for us. Nothing shows why**
- 9. At this unique distance from isolation**
  
- 10. It becomes still more difficult to find**
- 11. Words at once true and kind,**
- 12. Or not untrue and not unkind.**

(Philip Larkin, 1964, line numbers added)

### *1. Introduction*

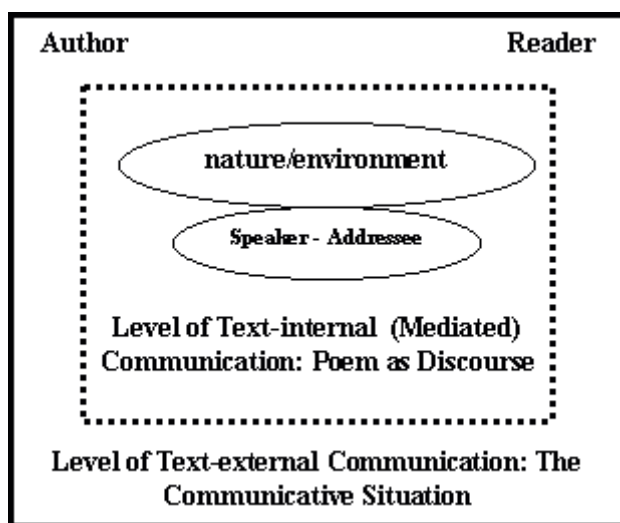
Philip Larkin's 'Talking in Bed' (1964) is a poem about isolation, disillusionment and failure, about the gap between expectations and reality, about the ironies of love in the modern world. It is also about the difficulty of telling the truth and being nice at one and the same time. Compared to other poems by Larkin, such as 'Church Going' and 'Whitsun Weddings', 'Talking in Bed' seems to have received very little attention, probably because of its superficial simplicity.

The present study provides an integrative, bottom-up stylistic analysis of the poem. The analysis is done in three main steps corresponding to the three main "stylistic levels" of a text: the "micro" level of the poem as **form**, the "intermediate" level of the poem as **discourse**, and the "macro" level of the poem as a **communicative event** (Finch, 1998, p. 208).

At the level of the poem as form, the study investigates the overall structure of the poem and the grammatical structure of the sentences therein from a rather traditional, pre-functional, point of view. The different meanings of the major lexical items, the semantics of negation, the instances of anomaly, ambiguity and polysemy and the use of adjectives in the poem are also explored. These aspects inevitably lead up to the higher and broader level of the poem as discourse.

The discursive aspects investigated in the study, based on Halliday's three metafunctions, are images and isotopies - language, love, and nature; lexical sets, cohesive devices, representation of reality (field) and transitivity choices - processes, participants and circumstances; demonstratives, pronoun reference, interpersonal relationships (tenor), deictics and the deictic sub-worlds of the poem.

At a broader level, the study addresses the communicative situation of the poem. This is where the biographical context and generic and other text-external aspects of the poem are explored. This wider context subsumes ideological as well as historical aspects of the text. It also includes the external tenor, i.e., the author-reader relationship, the code, mode and channel and more comprehensive comments on the field of the poem.



*Figure 1. Text Levels/Circles in Talking in Bed*

The three-level analysis procedure introduced above is based on the assumption that the poem is made up of three circles - the domestic circle of the "two people" in bed, the nature/environment circle, and finally the poet-reader circle, as shown in Figure (1) above, considerably modified from Jahn (2001, WWW).

It would be a fundamental mistake to think of these three levels or circles as separate or separable. It would be another mistake to think of a bottom-up reading of the poem as the only possible analytical procedure. The historical and the biographical contexts of the poem inevitably have an impact on its mode, field and tenor. These, in turn, have an

impact on its syntax, semantics and pragmatics, not to mention other aspect such as its phonology. Moreover, the author-reader square is not the end of the story; more and wider circles or squares are of course there. The entire graphic representation is obviously oversimplistic.

On the other hand, a deductive analysis of the poem, where the order of the analysis below is reversed, is quite possible (see Mazid, 2001, for an example). A deductive reading, however, is more likely to be rather evaluative, if not prejudiced. "Freed from the burden of evaluation we can look with a fresh and almost naïve eye at texts, and ask some very basic, but ultimately searching questions about the distinctive ways in which they communicate" (Finch, 1998, p.205).

## *2. The poem as form: Structure, syntax and semantics*

### *2. The poem as form:*

#### *Structure, syntax and semantics*

The poem consists of twelve lines, predominantly in the iambic pentameter, divided into three tercets, rhyming **aba cac dcd**, and a final triplet rhyming **eee**. A sense of continuity is maintained at the level of rhyme in the first three stanzas through the recurrence of one rhyming sound in each two successive stanzas - **a a a** ("easiest", "honest" and "unrest") and **c c c** ("silently", "sky" and "why").

There are no instances of **typographic** foregrounding and no significant departures from the typographic norms of English poetry, except for a relatively longer line, (8), and two relatively shorter lines, (11) and (12). It is also significant that the fourth stanza is a completion of the complex clause started in the third - "Nothing shows... and not unkind." The clause running through the last two stanzas seems to provide a compensation for the absence of continuity at the level of the rhyme scheme. The 8th line already contains another clause, "None of this cares for us," which partly explains why it is the longest in terms of layout and word-counts. The entire poem is in the declarative mood. The only exception is the reported question, "... why ... it becomes." This is not really an exception because the choice of putting the question in the indirect takes away most of its interrogative force.

The first stanza consists of two clauses. The first opens with a present participle modified by a prepositional phrase and functioning as the subject of the sentence. It is more nominal and more processural than "to talk." "In bed" is a **Circumstance** of Place or Location. The entire clause is in the **irrealis** mode, since "ought to" is an auxiliary of obligation and expectation. The superlative 'easiest' signals a subdued comparison with all other forms of talk. In addition to the common meaning of "not difficult", the adjective "easy" also means "free from pain and anxiety" as well as "sexually pleasant and relieving." A compound process of backformation and conversion has already produced the verb "ease", which is most frequently used in talking about sexual (phallic) penetration.

A thematized elliptical adverbial clause, "Lying together", starts the second line. The

word "lying" is an example of **lexical polysemy**: it means both "sleeping" and "telling lies." The adverbial clause modifies another clause where the real subject, "An emblem of two people being honest," is extraposed, while the subject position is occupied with an introductory "there". "There" with verbs of movement such as "go", "come", and "lie" is more "literary" and more formal than "there" followed by "be" forms (Leech & Svartvik, 1975, pp. 237-238). The present tense used in "goes" expresses an event simultaneous with the present moment. It is rather "dramatic"; it insists on the total enactment of the event. On the other hand, it is "habitual"; it expresses a series of individual events or actions that make up a state stretching back into the past and forward into the future (Leech, 1971). Yet, the verb is intransitive; the speaker does not have any role here except to remember.

The verb is modified with two adverb phrases - "back" and "so far" - both signaling a departure from the here and the now into a distant past; both are apparently temporal deictics referring respectively to "an earlier position or condition," "into the past" and "a great distance." What "goes back so far" is "an emblem of two people being honest." What is symbolized, represented, or substituted by the emblem is "two people being honest." This could read as: "two people who used to be honest," or "two people when/while they were honest." Although "An emblem of two people being honest" does not contain any finite verbs, reference to a distant past is already established in "goes back so far." The predicative adjective "honest" could mean "open-hearted", "frank", "faithful", "true", "real", "straightforward", "chaste", "telling the truth" and "free of deceit and cheating." Much of its semantic load has to do with the use of language, with the correspondence between appearance and reality, between what we feel and what we say. "Being", in addition to its non-finiteness, leaves us with impression that, even in the past, honesty was somehow artificial.

The second stanza opens with an **adversative** conjunction, "yet", which signals a contrast with the first stanza. The two simple sentences/clauses "more and more time passes silently" and "the wind's incomplete unrest / Builds and disperses clouds in the sky" are in the active voice. The verb in the first is intransitive, while the two verbs in the second are transitive and in a sense contradictory, or self-defeating, so to speak.

Time, which "passes silently", could mean a definite period or point - "now". It could also mean all the days of our past, present and future as well as one's life-span. Time and space, which is indicated by "outside", "in bed", "back", "so far" and "in the sky", are the setting of our human world's actions, states and events; the necessary background of everything we say, do, see, or experience. They are an indispensable part of the context of every human text. Yet, silence encompasses time in the present (con)text. The positioning of the double comparative "more and more" results in a **structural ambiguity**. The comparative may relate to the amount of time passing silently as well as to the increasing degree of silence. Silence refers to the making of no, or little noise, the giving of no answer. That time "passes silently" could mean that it passes unnoticed. The adverb may also have to do with the human participants involved; a silent partner is a sleeping partner.

Contrary to the time's passing in silence, the wind is actively "building and dispersing clouds in the sky." The wind's "unrest" is "incomplete" probably because it is "not finished", "not having all its parts", or "not thorough". More unrest is yet to come. "Unrest" refers to a disturbed condition, as well as a state of anxiety or resentment. The

wind often represents the fleeting, unstable and transient, the elusive and the intangible. It could refer to "air in natural motion", "thoughts and predictions", "a gale", "storm", or "hurricane", as well as "a strong force or trend." The arena of the wind's actions is the "sky" - representing infinity, eternity, immortality, and transcendence, yet lacking in the spiritual protection, certainty and providence of "heaven". "Clouds" are not only "visible vapors floating above the earth"; they are also "masses of dust or smoke moving together," "vague patches on a transparent object," "things that cause unhappiness or fear" and "distractions of the mind."

The third stanza is linked to the second with the **additive** conjunction "and". The verb in "And dark towns heap up on the horizon" is apparently an intransitive verb synonymous with "pile up" and "accumulate". The location of "heaping up" is "on the horizon." "Horizon" has some affinity with vision and knowledge. It is usually defined against a human seer, as it were; it is "the line at which the earth or sea and sky seem to meet." Figuratively, it is the limit of "one's knowledge, experience and thinking." So, in heaping up on the horizon, the towns also heap up on a human seer's vision as well as emotions. Those towns are "dark", moreover. The quality/color adjective is normally associated with death and destruction, imprisonment and spiritual darkness. It is also an indication of bad judgment, misfortune, illusion, depression and ignorance.

A comparatively short, simple sentence follows: "None of this cares for us." The first person plural object pronoun could **exclusively** mean the "two people" "lying together" now and who used to be "honest" "back so far" in the past. It could also be **inclusive** of all humankind - the people inside and those outside the text of the poem. In both cases, it is an object pronoun, lacking in action and volition. The verb "cares", in the **realis** mode, has a multitude of denotations and connotations: "feels interest in, anxiety about, or sorrow for," "likes to have someone or something," "has a taste for" and "looks after someone or something." It subcategorizes a (+animate +human) subject. None of the objects and entities referred to by the demonstrative pronoun 'this' have these features. Thus, the clause is twice negated: it begins with "None", and its positive version, "(some of) this cares for us", is semantically **anomalous**. "Cares", like "passes", "builds" and "disperses" and "heap up", is an instance of **grammatical polysemy**. It indicates both habituality ("this is **usually** the case") and instantaneity ("this is the case **now**").

Grammatical polysemy is also there in "shows" - the main verb in the next complex clause. This is the longest and heaviest clause in the poem, the only **hypotactic** clause therein, running on from stanza three to stanza four. The alpha clause is "Nothing shows..." projecting the indirect question "why...it becomes difficult to find...." Syntactically analyzed, the entire clause complex reads: "(theme; subject; negative -->) Nothing (ditransitive -->) shows [ellipsis: indirect object is probably 'us'] (direct object relative clause -->) why / (two prepositional phrases -->) At this unique distance from isolation / (Introductory 'it' marking a **split subject** - "to find... becomes": It (change-of-state verb -->) becomes (an adverb meaning "even", "yet", "in a greater degree", followed by a comparative adjective -->) still more (positive; predicative adjective -->) difficult (ellipsis: [for someone]) (infinitive; non-finite -->) to find / (object -->) Words (adverbial phrase expressing accompaniment and togetherness [Wh-iz deletion: [which are] -->) at once (positive; predicative adjectives -->) true and kind, / Or (double negatives; predicative adjectives -->) not untrue and not unkind."

The overall semantics of the clause is, in a sense, a semantics of **negation**: "nothing",

"not untrue", "not unkind." "Or", introducing an equally "difficult" alternative, is the negative version of "and". "Still more difficult" contains an intensified comparative followed by an opposite of "easy". The non-finite "to find" is obviously counterfactual, at least hypothetical. This is also the case with other verbs that are ostensibly in the realis mode in the clause; namely "shows" and "becomes." The verb "show" is ditransitive. Here it subcategorizes an implicit indirect object noun phrase and a subordinate clause. The different senses of the verb imply a tripartite relation between someone or something that shows someone else something: "makes clear", "allows to be seen", "directs", "conducts", "causes to understand", "gives evidence for having or being". The phenomenon that is not understood is why it is difficult for someone, such as the speaker in the poem, to find words that are at the same time "true and kind" or at least "not untrue and not unkind."

"Kind" and "true" both have to do with human language. The former has the senses of "thoughtful" and "sympathetic"; the latter, "factual", "faithful" and "reasonable". The double negative, "not" + "un", leaves the reader with only one possibility: words that are both untrue and unkind. The situation where this is the case is a "unique distance from isolation." The distance from isolation, suggesting someone distanced or isolated from isolation, is "unique" because of the irony of being so close and so remote at one and the same time, because it is both internal and external. Isolation is so tangible and heavy; it has become a concrete object from which people could be isolated. One final aspect of the poem as form is the use of adjectives therein. (An on-line ad for a book on Larkin suggests that 'Church Going' and 'Talking in Bed' provide two remarkable cases for the use of adjectives in English.) There are nine adjectives in the poem, in addition to the numeral "two", used in eight noun phrases: "Talking in bed ... easiest," "Two people... honest," "Words ... true and kind," "not untrue and not unkind"; "two people", "incomplete unrest", "dark towns", "unique distance". It is significant that the six adjectives that have to do with human interaction and relations are all **predicative**, while the three adjectives qualifying non-human objects and phenomena are all **attributive**. The word "two", a numeral determiner, is not really an attributive adjective. Attributive adjectives are more likely to be interpreted as inherent; predicative adjectives as non-inherent (Cf. Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973, pp. 120-125). The qualities and attributes associated with human beings are represented as more transient than those associated with natural objects and phenomena.

### *3. The poem as discourse*

#### *3. The poem as discourse*

##### *3.1. Isotopies and cohesion*

One strategy for the analysis of thematic coherence in a text is the use of the concept of "isotopies". An **isotopy** refers to "a level of meaning which is established by the recurrence in a text of **semes** belonging to the same semantic **field**, and which contributes to our interpretation of the theme" (Wales, 1989, p. 265, emphasis added). 'Talking in Bed' is in many ways a poem about talking, as apparent in the title and in the thematic "Talking in bed" at the very beginning of the poem. It is, in a sense, a **metalinguistic**

poem, a poem about the use, misuse and abuse of language, about the contribution of human language, not to communication and understanding, but to the alienation and isolation of humankind, of "two people" who used to be "honest", who "ought to" talk easily, but they are now "lying" together, watching time passing "silently". What remains is only an "emblem". An emblem is a (semio)linguistic signifier, or set of signifiers. It substitutes reality. In the present situation it substitutes a past reality, for it "goes back so far."

The epigrammatic ending of the poem bears further witness to the centrality of the **language** isotopy. An essential part of the predicament is the difficulty of "finding words" that are either "true and kind" or "not untrue and not unkind": the difficulty of telling the truth and being nice at one and the same time, or at least not lying and not being cruel. (The processes of "finding" and "showing" have already been treated as **Verbal**, with the latter allowing a **Relational** interpretation. The former seems to function as a distancing device; compared to "say" and "hear", it suggests a barrier between language use and language users.) The predicament becomes even more "unique" and more ironic when it comes to "talking in bed." "Talking in bed" is a situationally defined use of language. The unmarked features of this use include the highest degree of informality and intimacy. "The intimate style is our closest, friendliest, most trusting variety.... Families, lovers, and the closest of friends use it" (Preston & Shuy, 1976, p. 33, following Joos, 1967).

The second most prominent isotopy in the poem is that of a malicious, indifferent, if not hostile, **nature/ environment**. "Time" passes silently; the "wind" haphazardly "builds" and "disperses" "clouds" in the "sky"; "towns" are "dark"; they heap up on the "horizon" as well as on the vision and feelings of the human experiencer/s, none of them "cares" for or provides answers to the questions of the human/s at the unique distance from isolation. The hostile, indifferent nature isotopy challenges both the romantic fallacy of a friendly nature and the pathetic fallacy of nature as endowed with human capabilities, sensations and emotions (Cf. Abrams, 1993, pp. 142-143).

Rejection of the two fallacies should not necessarily result in a rejection of the possible analogies between the human and the natural worlds. The second stanza may very well be treated as a metaphorical representation of the speaker's thoughts ("wind"), ideas ('clouds') and mind ("sky"). The poem's apparent denial of nature's sympathy for humankind - "None of this cares for us" - does not preclude the use of nature as a background and a mirror for human emotions and mental states, or as a parallel world onto which one may project his/her emotions and states. On the other hand, most of the images in the poem occur within the nature/environment isotopy: the "dead" metaphor of "time" as something concrete that "passes"; the metaphoricalization of "the wind's incomplete unrest" into something that "builds and disperses" and of "dark towns" as moving and "heaping up." Two more metaphors connect nature to the human participants in the poem: the animation of those natural objects and phenomenon into things that could, but do not "care" for "us" and the rather far-fetched metaphor of "communication-as-showing" and vice versa in "Nothing shows why...."

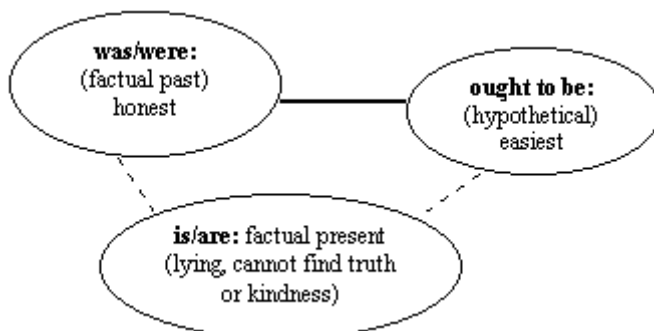
The third isotopy has to do with **love**. Those who "talk in bed" must be somehow intimate or close, at least ostensibly so. "Lying together", in the sense of sleeping together, is another indication of intimacy. Absence of one condition/consequence of love, "care", characterizes nature-human relationship. The "two people" who used to be "honest" are now "lying together", isolated and unable "to find / Words at once true and kind / Or not

untrue and not unkind." Somehow, the predicament has to do with sexual failure, probably resulting from dishonesty and deceit.

Most of the lexical items constituting the love isotopy have **sexual** over- and undertones. In addition to the already noted use of the verb "ease", an "easy lay" is "a woman who can be persuaded to copulate easily." Moreover, one of the basic meanings of "to lie with" is "to sleep with" and "to copulate with" (Spears, 1991, pp. 138, 267). In this semantic environment, "talking in bed" can be very easily interpreted as the verbal part of lovemaking. It is interesting, although not necessarily surprising, that some of the major organs of speech also have sexual functions.

One marginal isotopy that crosscuts the nature and the love isotopies is that of **night**. Thus, "in bed", "lying together", "dark towns" and "isolation" find their ideal environment in the night. Obviously, they are not restricted to this semantic domain. Yet, the circumstances surrounding them merit their grouping under a night isotopy, so to speak. Night, love and sex are closely related, and they, in fact, constitute one major isotopic center. One salient metaphor in this center is that of "emotional-intimacy-as-physical closeness." However, the metaphor is **aborted** by the paradox of closeness in bed and remoteness in thought and emotion.

The three isotopies - language, nature and love - not only constitute some of the major thematic preoccupations of the poem, but also function as important **cohesive ties**. Other unifying devices used in the poem include parallelism and repetition. For example, "Talking in bed" and "Lying together" are structurally and graphologically parallel. They are thus likely to be semantically equivalent as well. The subject of each seems to be the "two people" that appear in the third line. "Goes", "passes", "builds" and "disperses", "heap up", "cares", "shows" and "becomes" are all parallel in tense and all likely to be interpreted as grammatical polysemies, as already indicated. On the other hand, "to be" and "to find" are parallel infinitival constructions indicating non-factuality. Taken together, the factual and the non-factual verbs represent the three **referential axes** of the poem - the past, the present and the tenseless. These are the three "deictic sub-worlds" (Gavins, 2000, pp.19-24) in the poem. In the figure below a dotted line means hypothetical or non-factual:



**Figure 2. Three Deictic Sub-worlds in the Poem**

The "world-building elements" that make up these sub-worlds are as follows:

- **Present:** present tense - "goes", "passes", "builds and disperse", "heap up", "cares",

- "shows" and "becomes";  
- **Past:** adverbials - "back" and "so far";  
- **Tenseless:** "ought to be", "to find".

The adjective "honest", part of the past deictic sub-world, is antonymous to "lying", in the sense of "telling lies", yet consistent with "easiest", "in bed" and "together." "Back" and "so far" combine to intensify the distance between the past and the present. The gap between the past and the present is also indicated by the adversative "yet", which joins the first two stanzas. The conjunction is not merely a cohesive device; it signals a departure from one sub-world to another.

Other instances of repetition and parallelism in the poem include the repetition of "more", the negative prefix "un" and "in", the additive "and", the negative "no"/ "not" - "none" and "nothing" - the repetition of "kind" and the parallel "builds and disperses", obviously antonymous, "true and kind" and "not untrue and not unkind." Overt and covert comparatives also have isotopic and unifying effects: "in bed" is implicitly set against other forms and varieties of language use; "more", intensified once by "still", is an overt comparative and "easiest" an overt superlative; "unique" suggests the matchlessness of that "distance from isolation" to any other distance.

**Deictics and demonstratives** not only function as cohesive devices, but also help the reader identify the conceptual space, the different "sub-worlds", of the text. Thus, "there" may refer to "in bed" and to "back so far". "Outside" does not merely entail an "inside", as already stated; It signals a spatial movement resulting in a shift from the world of "two people" to the world of an indifferent nature outside. As demonstrated below, the two worlds are not separable. The demonstrative "this" occurs twice (Lines 8 and 9). The first "this" refers to the indifferent environment surrounding, at least, the "people" in the text. In this sense, the demonstrative pronoun becomes apparently **ironic**, for it categorically refers to someone or something near or close in space and/or time to the speaker/s. The lexical expectations raised by the use of "this" are frustrated by the anomaly and the negation of the entire clause, thus rendering the otherwise realis process of "caring" counterfactual.

The singularity of the demonstrative has other implications: elements of the surrounding environment unite in their indifference and there is no need for distinguishing them one from another. The second occurrence of "this" refers to the "unique distance from isolation." Here, it suggests that the isolation has to do with someone, or some people, in the immediate context of the poem. The people in the poem are referred to as "two people" and "us". These two references deserve an elaboration.

The referential scope of "two people" is marked for non-specificity. The identity of the participants is 'suppressed'. This is a "distancing device" which may be called "**defocalization**". Its goal is to minimize the speaker's involvement and to avoid any direct confrontation with the hearer/s (Haverkate, 1992, p. 516). In fact, there appears to be a boundary between the speaker-in-the-poem and the two people, of whom he is presumably one, resulting in a sense of detachment that is spatio-temporally consistent with displacement into the past and ideologically consistent with the sense of disillusionment and isolation. A more traditional stylistic effect of non-specificity is "to expand the speaker coordinate of the deictic center to the extent that its boundaries become indeterminate" (pp. 516-517). The two people in the poem could be any couple in

a similar situation.

The second person reference, "us", as already indicated, is both "*pluralis inclusivus*" and "*pluralis exclusivus*." Its use in the poem suggests a shared destiny, so to speak, and de-emphasizes the role of the speaker by involving the potential hearers, in addition to the already involved bed-partner, "in the state of affairs at issue" (Haverkate, 1992, pp. 517-518). Thus, the pronoun does not only function as a cohesive device, but it also contributes to blurring the boundaries between the inside and the outside of the text, as discussed in the following section.

### 3.2. *Field and tenor*

As already suggested, "talking in bed" is conventionally an instance of informal, intimate **register**. Linguistically, the intimate style is filled with deletion, ellipsis, rapid and slurred pronunciation, nonverbal communication and private code characteristics, "often unintelligible outside the smallest social units" (Preston & Shuy, 1976, p. 33, following Joos, 1967). The principal variables of register, based on Finch (2000, p.234) and applied to the case of "talking in bed" in Larkin's poem, are **field** (subject matter): family stuff, love and sex matters; **medium** (speech or writing): it is 'talking', not writing; **mode**: (genre): it must be "pillow-talk" - informal conversations, demonstrating the linguistic and paralinguistic features of the intimate style identified above; **channel** (face-to-face, telephone, etc.): very proximate, face-to-face, supposedly manipulating body language as well; **tenor** (interpersonal relationship): the "two people" "lying together" must be lovers or husband and wife, and **context** (situation - social and cultural factors): this must be a bedroom, most probably at night, for time "passes silently" and towns are "dark."

The "text-internal agency" who acts as the subject, "originator and voice" of the poetical text (Jahn, 2001, WWW) is in fact difficult to identify. There are no text-internal clues as to the gender of the speaker. In this case, we may apply Lanser's rule (1981, p.166, cited in Jahn, 2001, WWW): "in the absence of any text-internal clue as to the speaker's sex, use the pronoun appropriate to the author's sex." Thus, the speaker in 'Talking in Bed' is a "he", addressing both his communicational partner and the reader. This speaker is a **Sayer** in "talking in bed" and "lying together" and a **Carrier** in "two people being honest", where he is also part of the significance of the "emblem". His relationship with his partner is one of frustration and disillusionment. In the past, they were "honest"; now they are either silent or sleeping or being dishonest. The gap between expectation ("ought") and memories ("two people being honest"), on the one hand, and reality ("lying", "goes back"), on the other, is so obvious and so neatly presented in the first stanza. Below is a functional, ideational analysis of the poem.

The clause in the first line is **Relational**; "talking in bed" is the **Carrier** and "easiest" is the **Attribute**. The modal "ought" has what Hare (1952) calls "a supervenient character." The obligation therein does not derive from the speaker's authority or from an external authority; it is more a matter of conscience and good sense. We do not feel that the obligation is being or will be fulfilled. The reverse is quite often the case (Thomson & Martinet, 1986, p. 138). The parallel construction "Lying together" (Line 2) could be both **Material** (in the sense of "sleeping") and **Verbal** (in the sense of "telling lies" or "being false/dishonest"). Both "talking" and "lying", at least in its second sense, involve two persons. They are the hypothetical **Sayers** in the processes of talking and the **Actors** in the act sleeping. However, their agency is suspended: lying is not really an action except

in the sense of making love; talking in bed is not at all positive or "easy", and telling lies is a negative action. There is only an "emblem" of agency and positive mutuality, a reminder of "two people being honest." Honesty may have to do with talking as well as with sharing one bed; it is both linguistic and emotional. The movement in the only active, realis verb in the stanza, "goes", is a **semiotic**, rather than physical, movement. An "emblem" is something that represents, something that symbolizes, something that stands for something else. In this sense, "there goes back so far an emblem of two people being honest" is a **Relational** clause. The gap between the past and the present is intensified through the use of the two adverbials "back" and "so far". In the past, 'honest' used to be the **Attribute** and the 'two people' the **Carrier**. This is now history.

The ideational concern of the second stanza is the external environment. The three processes of "passing" (Line 4), "building" and "dispersing" (Line 6) are all **Material**, performed by non-human Agents - "time" and "the wind's incomplete unrest." The **Patient** of the processes of "building" and "dispersing" is also non-human ("clouds"). The entire clause in Lines 5 and 6 is an example of "**agentialization**" and "**overdetermination**" (van Leeuwen, 1995). One aspect, "unrest", of an inanimate entity, "wind", is the **Agent** of two realis, complete, volitional, Material processes, indicated by two transitive-effective verbs, "builds" and "disperses". Human presence is subdued in this stanza through the adverb "outside"; human presence is only entailed. In the same vein, the verb "pass" gives the impression of someone or something left on one side or behind.

The third stanza starts with a continuation of the nature and environment isotopy, but this time the focus is not on natural objects; it is on man-made aspects of the environment - "And dark towns heap up on the horizon." This is a **Material** clause, although the main verb is intransitive, subcategorizing a prepositional phrase of Place or Location, rather than a **Goal** or **Patient**. On the other hand, it is another instance of agentialization; "towns" are represented as doers. The sense of action is there, although the verb is not **effective** - to use Halliday's ergative terminology. A very vague sense of an impact on a human observer is also there, as already indicated in the discussion of the lexical item "horizon".

Human involvement is more obvious in the last two clauses in the poem - "None of this cares for us" and "Nothing shows [us] why ...." The former is a **Mental** clause where the **Senser** is "this", collectively referring to "time", "wind", "clouds", "the sky" and "dark towns". The **Phenomenon** is "us". "Us" is the only explicit, comparatively definite, personal pronoun in the poem. Yet, the positive, altruistic, realis, present senses of the clause where it occurs are nullified by "none". The pronoun is not only **deagentialized** and governed by a preposition, but it is also denied any benefit by that "care" through negation. The absence of "care" and responsibility and guidance ("Nothing shows...") is an indication of the absence of positive, productive love (Cf. Fromm, 1947, pp. 102-122).

Thus, the next finite verb, "shows" is only ostensibly beneficial. The long, complex clause where it occurs may be functionally analyzed as follows: "(theme; subject; negative, **Sayer** -->) Nothing (process: **Verbal** -->) shows [ellipsis: **Target** is probably "us"] (**Verbiage** -->) why/ (**Circumstance** of Location or Place -->) At this unique distance from isolation / (introductory "it" marking a **split subject** - "to find ... becomes": **Carrier** -->) It (change-of-state verb; process: **Relational** -->) becomes (an adverb meaning "even", "yet", "in a greater degree", followed by a comparative adjective -->)

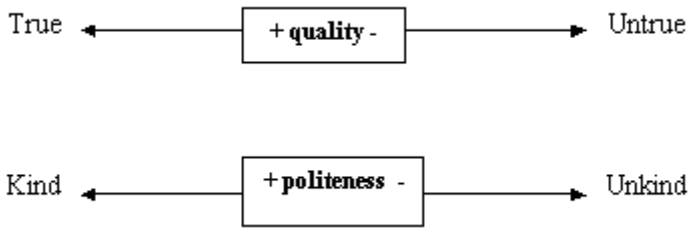
still more (positive; predicative adjective; **Attribute** -->) difficult (ellipsis: **Sayer** or **Senser** "for someone") (process: **Verbal** - ["to say or write"], or **Mental** - ["to hear or read"] -->) to find / (**Verbiage** or **Phenomenon** -->) Words (prepositional phrase expressing accompaniment and togetherness -->) at once (positive; predicative adjectives; **Attribute** -->) true and kind, / (a conjunction suggesting an alternative and also a negative version of "and" -->) Or (double negatives; predicative adjectives; **Attribute** -->) not untrue and not unkind."

The functional analysis so far given suggests that all the movement and action in the poem are the sole property of the natural objects and entities. Much of this movement and this action does not really make sense. For instance, the actions performed by the wind are absurd and non-consequential. The action performed by the dark towns, on the other hand, seems to lack volitionality. The human participants are not really "doing" anything. Much of their existence is invested in recollecting a wonderful past, sleeping silently, or else telling lies, watching meaningless action outside, being denied guidance as well as care, struggling in vain for salvation from isolation through language. Yet, it seems that it is more difficult to find successful human communication than to receive sympathy and care from nature.

At the heart of alienation and isolation lie communication breakdowns and pragmatic failures. Silence, dishonesty, lack of care and absence of candid and kind words are indications of those breakdowns and failures. The text-internal, as well as text-external, concern of the poem with language as crucial to human well-being may be approached from a pragmatic vantage-point. The requirement that "talking in bed" should be 'easiest', to begin with, is based on the assumption that between intimates and lovers there must exist the highest level of cooperation - in its Gricean sense. This assumption, which used to be valid when the "two people" were "honest", is now flouted because of their mutual dishonesty. In this context, the maxims of conversational cooperation are broken in at least two ways: **quietly violated** through deception and telling lies and **opted out of** through silence - "time passes silently" and "lying" in the sense of sleeping (Cf. Wallis & Shepherd, 1998, p. 53). Honesty, a mere memory now, largely consists in abiding by the Maxim of Quality in Grice's Cooperative Principle - "Do not say what you believe to be false; do not say that for which you lack evidence" (Finch, 2000, p. 160).

At a text-external level, the environment/nature isotopy is an apparent, rather than real, violation of the Maxim of Relation - "Be relevant" (pp. 160-161). The violation is only apparent because the description of a malicious, indifferent environment is indirectly relevant to the concern with the personal dilemma of the "two people" in the poem; more specifically, of the speaker. Dishonesty and lack of ease in bed are only intensified by a global sense of isolation.

Nothing can instruct the speaker on how to abide by the **Cooperative Principle** (Maxim of Quality) and the **Politeness Principle** (generosity, sympathy, minimization of cost to others, agreement, and so on; see Leech, 1983) at one and the same time - "Words at once true and kind." It is even difficult to achieve a minimum of cooperation and politeness. That is, it is difficult to avoid direct violations of the Maxim of Quality and direct violations of the Politeness Principle. The following diagram shows the different options resulting from the interplay of the Cooperative Principle (quality) and the Politeness Principles:



**Figure 3. Varieties of Quality and Politeness**

Nothing is said in the poem about the "true but unkind" option, which is (+ quality) but (- politeness), or the "kind but untrue" option, which is (- quality) but (+ politeness). The implication is that these two options are not in demand. They seem to be available everywhere. The difficult-to-attain ideal is a combination of truth (+ quality) and kindness (+ politeness). This seems to be the heart of the *sententiae* that "lay down the law" of the poem (Wallis & Shepherd, 1998, p. 46). It is analogous to Mahatma Gandhi's "Whenever you have truth, it must be given with love, or the message and the messenger will be rejected." However, it remains an ideal that the speaker in the poem seeks. An alternative that he can accept is to find a midway between truth and falsehood, between kindness and cruelty - "not untrue" (- - quality) and "not unkind" (- - politeness).

Like the Cooperative and the Politeness Principles themselves, the poem establishes a tension between expectations and reality. In other words, two "attitudinal sub-worlds" (Gavins, 2000, p. 21) - the **desire** (want-world) and the **belief** (believe-world) - conflict with real life experience. Both belief and desire are included in the meanings of "ought to". The desires of having easy talk in bed and finding "true and kind", or "not untrue and not unkind" words are aborted in reality. The belief is not instantiated and the desire is not fulfilled.

#### ***4. The Communicative Situation***

##### ***4. The Communicative Situation***

One important consideration at the level of the communicative situation is the **genre** to which the text belongs. 'Talking in Bed' is obviously a lyrical poem - "a subjective and reflective type of discourse in which a speaker presents or describes an emotion, or discusses a philosophical problem." "The sentences of a lyrical poem are typically framed in the present tense" (Jahn, 2001, WWW).

'Talking in Bed' fulfills most of these generic expectations. The central tense therein is the present, although there are references to the past and the timeless, as already explained. Subjective emotions of isolation and alienation, on the other hand, dominate the text. The emotions are not groundless; they have their socio-philosophical causes in the gap between appearance and reality and the absence of true love and intimacy. This is where the authorial and the textual I's - the poet and the speaker-in-the-text - seem to coincide. Even though speakers and authors should be treated as "distinct textual roles", they may, of course, "share certain characteristics; indeed, biographical and other text-external evidence may add considerable substance and meaning to a poem" (Jahn, 2001, WWW).

The following is a very brief biography of the poet. The focus is more on the metatextual and intertextual aspects of the poem than on the details of the poet's life. This section is, not unjustifiably, quotation-heavy. It is based on different accounts of Larkin's life and works and on different critical responses to his poetry in general. Philip Arthur Larkin was born on August 9, 1922, in Coventry. The first of his poems to be published in a national weekly was 'Ultimatum', which appeared in the *Listener*, November 28, 1940. In June 1943, three of his poems were published in *Oxford Poetry (1942-43)*. In 1945, ten of his poems, which later that year would be included in *The North Ship*, appeared in *Poetry from Oxford in Wartime*. It was in Belfast that he applied "fresh vigour to his poetry activities," and, in 1951, had a small collection, *XX Poems*, "privately printed" in an edition of 100 copies. Also, in 1954, the Fantasy Press published a pamphlet containing five of his poems. The Marvell Press, based in Hessle, near Hull, published 'Toads' and 'Poetry of departures' in *Listen*. It would be the Marvell Press that published his next collection *The Less Deceived*. Larkin took up the position of Librarian at the University of Hull on March 21, 1955, and it was in October of that year that *The Less Deceived* was published. It was this collection that would be "the foundation of his reputation as one of the foremost figures in 20th Century poetry." It wasn't until 1964 that his next collection, *The Whitsun Weddings* was published. Again, the collection was "well received," and "widely acclaimed," and the following year, Larkin was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry. It was during the years 1961-71 that Larkin contributed monthly reviews of jazz recordings for the *Daily Telegraph*, and these reviews were brought together and published in 1970 under the title *All What Jazz: a record diary 1961-1968*. He also edited the *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse*, which was published in 1973. His last collection *High Windows* was published in 1974, and affirmed his position as "one of the finest poets in English literary history." 'Aubade', his last great poem, was published in *The Times Literary Supplement* in December 1977. A collection of his essays and reviews was published in November 1983 as *Required Writing: miscellaneous pieces 1955-1982*, and won the W.H. Smith Literary Award for 1984. Larkin received many other awards, especially in his later years. In December of 1984 he was offered the chance be Poet Laureate but declined, "being unwilling to accept the high public profile and associated media attention of the position." Philip Larkin died of cancer on Monday December 2 1985 (Orwin, 2002, WWW).

Larkin was a leading figure of "The Movement" - a term coined to describe a group of British poets that coalesced during the 1950s'. Those poets addressed everyday British life in a simple, straightforward language with very little, if any, experimentation with form. In addition to Larkin, Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie and Thom Gunn were members of the "Movement." 'In Talking in Bed', there is evidence for the main characteristics of the "Movement." Simple, accessible and only minimally ambiguous, the poem departs from the canons that characterize, perhaps stigmatize, many modern and post-modern poems. In this respect, the poem challenges its own author's sense of isolation and alienation - both text-internal and text-external.

A large portion of the alienation of modern poets derives from the deterioration of literary competence among a continually decreasing readership, on the one hand, and the association of most modern(ist) poetry with extreme symbolism, ambiguity and sometimes unintelligibility, on the other. What makes Larkin's poem readable despite its sad tone is probably what made Larkin himself popular: "With Larkin and his English readers, the silliness which helped to make him popular was his genuine, uncultivated, sincere philistinism. In his prose he wrote disparagingly of painters who put two noses on

one face and sculptors who carved holes through bodies; he lectured us on the *ugliness* of modernism" (Hall, 1999, WWW).

One more distinctive feature about Larkin is his "resistance to biographical curiosity" which made him "order the destruction of his diaries and private papers after his death." However, he could not escape politicization and ideologization. Some critics find in him "a misogynist or male chauvinist on account of attitudes towards women expressed or suggested in various poems, or in his private life" (Anthony, 1992, WWW). Larkin's resistance to biographical curiosity, whatever it meant for him, does not make possible a decontextualized reading of his poetry. The thematic preoccupations, the general tone and the stylistic features of 'Talking in Bed', as discussed above, not only reflect historical conditions and personal propensities, but also cohere with the bulk of his work in general. Described as "the saddest heart in the post-war supermarket" (Hombberger, 1977, cited in Enani, 1985, p. 65), Larkin devoted the vast majority of his poetry, 'Talking in Bed' included, to "what is generally taken to be negative aspects of life, such as loneliness and dejection, disappointments, loss, and the terrifying prospect of impending death," and has come to be "identified with a downhearted, pessimistic temper and tone of voice." Those feelings stemmed from, at least partly, his sense of futility, "the feeling that his lifetime passes unused," and his inability to cope with people to the extent that he seemed to "despise other people in general, and abhors any kind of company" (Hall, 1999, WWW).

The last clause in 'Talking in Bed' clearly indicates the speaker's mistrust in any prospects of true love or friendship, his frustration and the gap between expectations and reality. Throughout the poem, "the theme is dark [and the towns, too], the tone bleak with disappointment at the discovery that the passage of time [which 'passes silently'] does not bring with it those fulfillments that youthful expectation seemed latent with. The characteristic Larkin[esque] tone of disillusionment is strong" (Anthony, 1992, WWW). This is all true; yet we cannot make generalizations on Larkin's attitude to women based on the poem. Assuming that the speaker in the poem is a male, as we already did, the other person is apparently less powerful and less articulate. The speaker has the advantage of talking, has the access to discourse. He can make statements about moral obligations, narrate past events and states, describe nature and evaluate its attitude to humans and finally diagnose some of the maladies which humanity suffers from. This is all on a narrow scale. Moreover, the shaky conclusion that the male participant is more powerful should be understood within the context of an overall sense of isolation and deprivation, irrespective of gender.

"This is the man who famously said that deprivation was for him what daffodils were for Wordsworth." Deprivation in a situation of pleasure and fulfillment, in bed, is the heart of the irony of the poem. Irony, one dominant feature in modern poetry, the mismatch between the ideal and the real, is encoded in the thematic development, transitivity choices and deictic sub-worlds of the poem. "In this coincidence of manner and matter is a good portion of Larkin's genius." And in the mismatch between what is and what ought to be, 'Talking in Bed' is intertextually related to many other works by Larkin such as 'Mr. Bleaney', which "fully exemplifies his interest in what we are and what we can imagine ourselves to be" (Hall, 1999, WWW).

'Talking in Bed' echoes its historical and intertextual context in many other ways. The speaker's awareness of the indifference and malice in nature - "None of this cares for us" - reflects one aspect of the poet's personality as far as perception of nature and environment

is concerned: "Nature, especially the least comforting aspects of nature: the blank moon, the empty air, the horizon over the sea, were for Larkin signs that it would be wrong to look for presence anywhere 'out there'" (Anthony, 1992, WWW). Moreover, the poem confirms one of Larkin's pronouncements on his own poetry: "I think a poem usually starts off either from the feeling **How beautiful that is** or from the feeling **How true that is**. One of the jobs of the poem is to make **the beautiful seem true** and **the true beautiful**, but in fact the disguise can usually be penetrated" (cited in Anthony, 1992, WWW, emphasis added).

In fact, 'Talking in Bed' starts from the feeling of how true and ends with the double feeling of how true and how kind that is. Both feelings end in disappointment, as already indicated. Yet, in its attempt to establish order and unity, to provide glimpses of coherence in a world falling apart, the poem makes itself seem true - true to its author, to its age, to the personae therein and to us as human beings.

The poem is about the same barren lust and futile communication that are found in Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. It is as clipped and anti-romantic, too. It is also about the disillusionments and discontents of urbanization. The *urbs aeternae* ("eternal cities") are now "dark towns" that "heap up on the horizon." Nature is now an enemy, not a Wordsworth's paradise.

'Talking in Bed' is as true to the modern world as *The Waste Land* is, although in a totally different way and on an apparently smaller scale. For it is also about the agony of alienation, the irony of senseless sex - "pillow-talk" that cannot be "easy" and bed-partnership that can no longer be "honest" - the loss of faith in communion and the death of (true and/or kind) language.

### *Concluding remarks*

#### *5. Concluding remarks*

The integrative, bottom-up analysis of 'Talking in Bed' in the present paper is by no means the final word on the poem. Yet, it has at least one basic value, which is the accumulation of understanding resulting from the movement from the more micro to the more macro, from the very narrow level of the poem as form to the relatively broader level of the poem as discourse and finally to the most comprehensive level of the communicative context of the poem.

Thus, the lexical items, with their different denotations and connotations, and the basic grammatical categories and structures unite to produce the three main isotopies of the poem - language, love and nature. It is also those items, structures and categories that establish the cohesive chains and the three deictic sub-worlds of the poem - the past, the present and the tenseless. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, they are tools and indexes of the ideational components of the text. The text's conceptual space is a function of those elements explored at its formal level.

In the conceptual space of the poem, we encounter an emotional linguistic predicament of a couple who are unable to communicate, a couple who used to be honest. Now, they are

not. The dilemma seems to lie in the inability to tell the truth and be nice at one and the same time. (A pragmatic approach, combining Grice and Leech, is used to shed more light on this linguistic crisis.) What makes the situation even more problematic is the lack of any support or sympathy from the external, non-human environment.

Many other aspects are explored at the level of the poem as discourse, probably because this is the densest level. It bridges the gap between the poem as form and the poem as a communicative event within a socio-historical context. It subsumes the text as representation, the interpersonal relationships in the text, its transitivity choices and ideological processes, the politics of pronouns and deictics, in addition to isotopies, cohesion and imagery. An attitude of objectification and detachment dominates the text. The attitude is accompanied with a negative representation of the human participants and an anti-romantic representation of the environment outside.

The findings of the analysis of the levels of form and discourse in the poem confirm many of the features of the communicative situation where it was written. The poem is true to its own genre and author, to the poetic sensibility to which it belongs, with the notable exception of its minimal symbolism and ambiguity, and to the socio-historical conditions where it occurred.

### **Endnote**

The explanations of the lexical items in the poem are almost all based on A. S. Hornby's *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974.

### **References**

- Abrams, M. H. (1993). *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (6th ed). New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.
- Anthony, B. (1992). "Without Metaphysics: The poetry of Philip Larkin." [On-Line]. Available: <http://www.sogang.ac.kr/~anthony/Larkin.htm>
- Dahlgren, K. (1992). "Convergent evidence for a set of coherence relations." In D. Stein (ed.) *Cooperating with Written Texts: The Pragmatics and Comprehension of Written Texts* (pp. 631-663). Berlin and New York: Mouton De Gruyter.
- Enani, M. M. (1986). *Varieties of Irony: An Essay on Modern English Poetry*. Cairo: State Publishing House.
- Finch, G. (1998). *How to Study Linguistics*. London: Macmillan.
- Finch, G. (2000). *Linguistic Terms and Concepts*. London: Macmillan.
- Fromm, E. (1947). *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*. New York: Fawcett World Library.
- Gavins, J. (2000). "Absurd tricks with bicycle frames in the text world of *The Third Policeman*." *Nottingham Linguistic Circular*, 15: 17-33.
- Georgakopoulou, A. & Goutsos, D. (1997). *Discourse Analysis: An Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

- Hall, D. (1999). "Philip Larkin." *The New Criterion On-line*. Available: <http://www.newcriterion.com/archive/summer99/philip.html>
- Hare, R. M. (1952). *The Language of Morals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Haverkate, H. (1992). "Deictic categories as mitigating devices." *Pragmatics*, 2 (4): 502-522.
- Jahn, M. (2001). *A Guide to the Theory of Poetry*. [On-Line]. Available: <http://www.uni-koeln.de/~ame02/pppp.htm>
- Lakoff, G. (1994). *Conceptual Metaphor Homepage*. [On-Line]. Available: <http://cogsci.berkeley.edu/MetaphorHome.html>
- Lanser, S. S. (1981). *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Larkin, P. (1964). *Whitsun Weddings*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Leech, G. N. (1971). *Meaning and the English Verb*. London: Longman.
- Leech, G. N. (1983). *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Leech, G. N. & Svartvik, J. (1975). *A Communicative Grammar of English*. London: Longman.
- Martin, J. R. , Matthiessen, C. M.I. M. & Painter, C. (1997). *Working with Functional Grammar*. London: Arnold Publishers.
- Mazid, B. M. (2001). "Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach*: A stylistic collage." *Cairo Studies in English: Essays in Honour of Fatma Mousa*, pp. 129-157.
- Orwin, J. L. (2002). "Philip Arthur Larkin." [On-Line]. Available: <http://www.philiplarkin.com/biog.htm>
- Preston, D. R. & Shuy, R. (1976). *Varieties of American English: Teacher's Handbook*. Washington, D. C: USIA.
- Quirk, R. & Greenbaum, S. (1973). *A University Grammar of English*. London: Longman.
- Spears, R. (1991). *A Dictionary of Slang and Euphemism* (2nd ed.). London: Penguin.
- Thompson, G. & Thetela, P. (1995). "The sound of one hand clapping: The management of interaction in written discourse." *Text*, 15 (1): 103-127.
- Thomson, A. J. & Martinet, A. V. (1986). *A Practical Grammar of English* (4th ed). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tony, K. (no date). "The four aways: Experience and expectation in the poetry of Philip Larkin." [On-Line]. Available: <http://philiplarkin.20m.com/>
- Van Leeuwen, T. (1995). "Representing social action." *Discourse & Society*, 6: 81-106.
- Wales, K. (1989). *A Dictionary of Stylistics*. London: Longman.
- Wallis, M. & Shepherd, S. (1998). *Studying Plays*. London: Arnold Publishers.