

Original Article

Text as the Realization of Discourse: Signifier, Denotatum, and Genre Embedding in James Joyce's "The Sisters"

Tamari Alpaidze

English Philology Department, Akaki Tsereteli State University, Kutaisi, Georgia.

tamar.alpaidze@atsu.edu.ge

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Abstract - This paper applies a text-linguistic and discourse-theoretical framework to James Joyce's short story "The Sisters," the opening story of *Dubliners*. The framework treats a text as the linguistic dimension of discourse and relies on the categories of signifier, denotatum, cohesion, genre, and intersubjectivity. The analysis argues that the story is organized around one sustained linguistic operation: it deliberately keeps the link between signifier and denotatum open, so that the two never fully align. This device is reinforced by the fracturing of cohesion in dialogue, where speech breaks off into silence and euphemism. It is brought into sharpest relief by a single embedded fragment of journalistic discourse, the formal death notice pinned to the priest's door, whose denotative completeness contrasts with the evasive oral discourse of the surrounding community. The paper also considers the story's genre status as artistic discourse, the narrating subject's inadequacy as an interpreter of his own experience, and the story's embeddedness in the religious-cultural vocabulary of Catholic Dublin. It concludes that Joyce's text does not merely represent a death; its form demonstrates that language cannot fully express reality, which supports the view that texts are open-ended and lack a single settled meaning.

Keywords - Cohesion, Denotatum, Discourse, Genre, Signifier.

1. Introduction

Contemporary text linguistics, which arose in parallel with discourse theory in the 1960s and 1970s, proposed a fundamental revision of the traditional hierarchy of linguistic units. [1] The sentence had long been regarded as the highest unit of the language system, but it became increasingly clear that certain linguistic phenomena, the function of the article being a paradigmatic case, cannot be adequately described within the boundaries of a single sentence and require reference to a broader unit: the combination of sentences, or text. [1] Text thereby came to be understood not simply as a stretch of writing but as the specifically linguistic dimension of discourse: the product of the actualization of a language, belonging to a concrete linguistic subject and to a concrete culture or epoch [1]

This reconceptualization carries significant implications for literary analysis. If a text is inseparable from its language, its producing subject, and its cultural moment, [1] then an adequate reading of a literary text must attend not only to theme and plot but also to the way the text's own linguistic architecture (its distribution of discourse types, its management of meaning at the level of the sign, its cohesive structure) enacts and reinforces its concerns. This paper takes as its object James Joyce's "The Sisters", [2] the opening story of *Dubliners*, because the story is unusually self-conscious about language as its own subject matter. It is a story about the difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of naming, and it stages that difficulty through devices that map precisely onto core categories of text



linguistics: the distinction between signifier and denotatum, the category of cohesion, the classification of discourse into types and genres, and the principle of intersubjectivity that governs a text's relation to its addressee. [1] The paper first describes the material, the analytical procedure, and the theoretical framework (Section 2). It then presents the analysis and discussion (Section 3) and draws its conclusions (Section 4).

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Material and Analytical Procedure

The material of this study is the short story "The Sisters," the opening story of James Joyce's collection *Dubliners*, read in the edition listed in the References. [2] All quotations from the story are taken from this edition. The study is qualitative and based on close reading. The story is treated as a text in the sense defined below, that is, as the linguistic dimension of a discourse produced by a given subject, addressed to a given addressee, and situated within a given culture. [1]

The analysis proceeded in six steps, which determine the order of Section 3:

- Determining the discourse type and genre of the story and of the fragments embedded in it;
- Tracing the relation between signifier and denotatum for the story's key lexical items (*paralysis*, *gnomon*, *simony*);
- Examining cohesive ties (lexical chains, ellipsis, pronominal reference) and the breaking-off of utterances in dialogue, and distinguishing cohesion from coherence;
- Describing the narrating subject and the addressee in terms of intersubjectivity;
- Identifying the religious-cultural vocabulary on which the text depends; and
- Analysing the embedded journalistic fragment (the death notice) against the surrounding discourse.

Because the study is interpretive rather than quantitative, its results are presented as readings supported by quoted textual evidence, so that each step can be checked against the primary text. The theoretical apparatus applied in these steps is drawn throughout from Tevdoradze [1], supplemented where indicated by Saussure [3] and Widdowson [4], and is outlined in Sections 2.2 to 2.5.

2.2. Discourse and Text

Discourse is regarded as the actualization of language within the framework of verbal communication. Communication itself may be verbal or non-verbal (gesture, facial expression, and so on), but discourse in the strict sense concerns the verbal, that is, word-based, actualization of the linguistic system. [1] The distinction between text as a linguistic product and discourse as the communicative process that gives rise to it is likewise central to discourse analysis more broadly, where text is treated as the trace or record left behind by an act of discourse. [4] Because discourse is a multidimensional phenomenon, its use of language activates the speaker's personal memory, cultural identity, and the broader civilization from which the speaker comes. For this reason, a linguistic dimension of discourse has to be separated out, and it is called a "text." Three factors must be taken into account:

- The language in which it exists (a national language such as English, French, or Georgian);
- The linguistic subject who produces it (and, correlatively, the addressee toward whom it is directed); and
- The culture, or epoch, to which it belongs.

Because human linguistic activity is distributed across different spheres and situations of human reality, discourse itself differentiates into types (everyday, artistic, journalistic, scientific, medical discourse, and so on), each of which further subdivides into genres. The genres of scientific discourse include the lecture, the monograph, and the scientific article; the genres of journalistic discourse include reportage and the newspaper article; the genres of artistic discourse include the short story, the novel, the sonnet, and the drama. Genre, on this view, is not simply

a formal category but a socially recognized way of using language to achieve a particular communicative purpose within a given discourse community. This is what allows a reader to recognize a stretch of text as belonging to journalism, science, or literature before its content is even processed. [4]

2.3. Cohesion as the Central Textual Category

Every phenomenon requires one key feature, called its category. For the sentence, that feature is predication: it turns “small dog” (a mere phrase) into “the dog is small” (a full sentence, because something is said about the subject). For the text, the equivalent feature is cohesion: the words and connections that link sentences together so that they form one continuous whole rather than separate lines. Without cohesion, a text does not function as a text, since it is the connections between sentences that make them a single, flowing whole. [1]

2.4. Signifier and Denotatum

At the level of the individual linguistic sign, traditional linguistics distinguishes two aspects of meaning. The signifier is the meaning of a word fixed within the system of language, independent of any concrete referent. The denotatum is the connection of that signifier to a specific, concrete object in reality at the moment of actual use. The distinction has its roots in the Saussurean separation of the linguistic sign into signifier and signified as two sides of a single psychological entity, arbitrarily linked within the system of language itself and prior to any act of reference to the world. [3] A speaker can employ the word “flower” meaningfully without any concrete flower being present, because the signifier already encodes a human concept that reflects reality in the abstract; [1] the value of the word is given by its place within the system of language as a whole, not by any single act of speech. [3] Denotation, however, occurs when that abstract sign is tied to a specific referent within an actual instance of speech. This link between sign and referent is not automatic: a sign can, for a particular speaker or listener, remain without a settled referent. It is exactly this kind of unresolved, suspended meaning that, as this paper will show, Joyce uses with remarkable precision.

2.5. Intersubjectivity

Discourse exists only within a communicative situation and is always directed at someone. [1] A text emerges from an exchange between two parties, a speaker and a listener, and for that exchange to work, both sides need some common ground. When that shared understanding is absent, cannot be assumed, or when even the speaker is not fully clear about what he or she means, the relationship between speaker and listener breaks down: it ceases to be a straightforward exchange of meaning and becomes tense and unstable.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. “The Sisters” as Artistic Discourse: Genre and its Subversion

“The Sisters” belongs, straightforwardly, to artistic discourse and, within that type, to the genre of the short story, the genre that structures Joyce’s collection *Dubliners* as a whole. Yet on a text-linguistic reading, it is immediately striking that the story’s generic identity is complicated from its opening sentence. The story opens not with an event but with three words that circulate, adrift, in the narrator’s consciousness. [2]

These three terms (paralysis, gnomon, simony) are presented to the reader precisely as unattached signifiers: they are named, and their strangeness is remarked upon, but their concrete relevance to the situation at hand is withheld. [2] The story thus begins not with a plot but with a demonstration of the very distinction between signifier and denotatum that will structure the whole. This is a significant generic move. Rather than fulfilling the short story’s implicit promise of narrative delivery, the opening paragraph enacts a kind of linguistic suspension, in which the reader is placed in the same position as the boy: in possession of words without yet possessing what those words denote.

3.2. Signifier and Denotatum as the Structural Axis of the Narrative

The gap between signifier and denotatum is not merely a stylistic quirk of the story; it is the central principle shaping the text's entire semantic structure. Consider the word *paralysis* itself. For the boy, it functions initially as a signifier entirely detached from any concrete object. He tells us it sounded to him "like the name of some maleficent and sinful being", [2] a formulation that reveals the signifier operating almost mythologically, generating affect and dread through pure linguistic form rather than through reference. The word means a great deal to him, since it is fixed in his mind with overtones of sin, malice, and strangeness, but at this point it does not correspond to anything real: no actual object or event backs it up.

As the narrative proceeds, this signifier is gradually, and only ever partially, supplied with a denotatum: the decaying, paralyzed, and finally dead body of Father Flynn. [2] The boy visits the house, studies the death notice, observes the corpse in its vestments, and listens to the women's halting reminiscences. [2] In each of these cases, the boy and the reader try to complete the work of establishing what the word means.

Crucially, however, this act of denotation is never completed. The reader is never told, in any unambiguous form, exactly what happened to Father Flynn. Several fragmentary and mutually incompatible clues are offered: old Cotter's insinuation that there was "something queer... something uncanny about him"; the story of the broken chalice, which "affected his mind"; and Eliza's final, devastating anecdote about the priest being discovered "sitting up by himself in the dark in his confession-box, wide-awake and laughing-like softly to himself". [2] None of these fragments coheres into a single, denotatively complete account. The reader, like the boy, is left holding a signifier (the priest's decline, his "queerness," his paralysis both literal and figurative) without ever securing a fully stabilized denotatum.

3.3. Cohesion Deliberately Fractured

While signifier and denotatum operate at the level of individual words, cohesion functions at the level of the whole text: it is the connective tissue meant to tie sentences and utterances together into one unified piece of discourse. This framework maps onto "The Sisters" [2] with unusual precision, partly because Joyce seems to have built the story around a deliberate manipulation of cohesion rather than a simple deployment of it. In the story, this connective tissue is not missing entirely (the story remains readable and coherent), but it is noticeably and deliberately weakened, especially in the way dialogue is reported.

3.3.1. The lexical chain that opens the story

The story famously begins with the boy repeating three words to himself: *paralysis*, *gnomon*, *simony*. These are not merely thematic markers; they function as the story's primary cohesive chain in the lexical sense. Each is taken up across the narrative in transformed form. *Paralysis* literally afflicts Father Flynn's body, but it also describes the social and spiritual stasis of everyone around him: the aunt's ritualized gestures, the boy's inability to feel what he is "supposed" to feel, and the town's paralysis of unspoken suspicion. *Simony*, the sin of trafficking in sacred things for profit, echoes obliquely in the priest's fixation on the mechanics of the Mass (rubrics, vestments, the correct handling of the chalice) rather than its meaning. Lexical cohesion here is not simple repetition but repetition-with-drift, in which a word's semantic field expands to cover the whole text without ever being explained. [1]

3.3.2. Gnomon as a figure for the story's own cohesive strategy

This is the most interesting move. A gnomon is a parallelogram with a smaller similar parallelogram removed from one corner: a whole defined by what is missing from it. Joyce uses this almost as a self-description of his method. The story is built on ellipses: broken sentences, unfinished thoughts, and information the reader is never given outright. Cohesion theory typically views ellipsis as a linking device that connects one part of a text to an earlier part by assuming that the missing content can be recovered from what came before. Joyce turns this into a deliberate technique: his sentences leave things out, but what is missing can never really be filled in. The reader is

expected to link ideas together as if the connection existed, yet there is no clear reference point to complete that link.

3.3.3. Referential cohesion and its deliberate breakdown

The narrator is never named. The priest is referred to variously as “he,” “the old man,” “him,” and “Father Flynn,” and the antecedents of pronouns in the adults’ conversation are frequently ambiguous. Ordinarily, pronominal reference is one of the most basic cohesive ties holding a text together; here, it produces opacity rather than clarity. The device that should stitch the text into continuity instead stitches together a community’s evasiveness, so that cohesion becomes a formal register of repression and gossip.

3.3.4. Aposiopesis at the site of denotation

Consider the repeated device of the unfinished sentence, most famously in old Cotter’s speech: “I wouldn’t like children of mine... to have too much to say to a man like that,” and “No, I wouldn’t say he was exactly... but there was something queer... there was something uncanny about him”. [2] Syntactically, these utterances are marked by aposiopesis, the rhetorical figure of breaking off mid-sentence. From a text-linguistic perspective, this syntactic incompleteness functions as a direct formal analogue of semantic incompleteness. [1] The sentence’s cohesive apparatus (in the narrow, grammatical sense) is disrupted at precisely the moment where semantic content, the naming of what exactly was wrong with the priest, would otherwise be supplied. Cohesion, in other words, is fractured at the site of denotation, reinforcing at the syntactic level the same withholding that operates at the lexical level.

3.3.5. Cohesion without coherence

The same pattern recurs throughout the women’s conversation in the final section of the story. Eliza’s speech is characterized by circumlocution, euphemism, and tangent: she speaks of the chalice being found “empty,” of the priest’s mind being “affected,” and of him being “too scrupulous always”. [2] The text maintains a surface-level cohesion, since the conversation proceeds turn by turn in recognizable dialogic form, but this surface cohesion masks a deeper failure of coherence: the women’s talk never assembles into a single, semantically unified account of what happened. Cohesion is preserved formally, while coherence, the deeper, meaning-level unity that cohesion is theoretically supposed to serve [1], is continually deferred, displaced, and finally left incomplete. This is precisely the gap that discourse analysis identifies when it separates the two categories: a text may be perfectly cohesive at the sentence-linking level and still fail, for its addressee, to cohere as a unified act of meaning. [4] “The Sisters” exploits exactly this gap for its own thematic ends.

3.3.6. The theoretical payoff

If predication is what makes “small dog” into a full sentence, cohesion is what makes a sequence of sentences into a full text. [1] Joyce shows, however, that a text can also be built by systematically withholding the very ties that should make it whole, while still producing the experience of unity. “The Sisters” achieves textual integrity not despite its gaps but through them: the word *gnomon* names the technique, the word *paralysis* names its effect on character and reader alike, and *simony* quietly indicts the whole social ritual of substituting form for substance, which is, not coincidentally, also what happens when cohesion becomes empty repetition rather than genuine connective tissue.

3.4. The Narrating Subject and the Estranged Addressee

The principle of intersubjectivity holds that a text is always produced by a subject and directed toward an addressee, with communicative adequacy depending on some degree of shared understanding between the two. [1] “The Sisters” complicates this principle in a distinctive way: the narrating subject, the boy, is not simply a transparent conduit of information to the reader but is himself an inadequate interpreter of his own experience.

The boy's first-person narration is characterized throughout by a kind of belated, retrospective uncertainty. He reports the adults' evasions without being able to supply what they withhold. He registers his own peculiar feelings, such as "I felt that I had been very far away, in some land where the customs were strange", [2] without being able to analyze or resolve them. Most tellingly, his dream of the priest, with its "grey face" attempting "to confess something" [2] is presented without interpretive gloss, as a fragment of experience whose significance exceeds the narrator's own grasp.

This has a direct effect on how the text structures the relationship between speaker and listener. The boy's narration is not a case of someone who fully understands relaying a clear meaning to a listener; instead, the person producing the discourse does not fully grasp its meaning himself. This puts the reader, the story's real addressee, in an unusual position: rather than simply receiving a message, the reader has to do interpretive work that the narrator is unable to do. The earlier gap between signifier and denotatum is thus mirrored by another gap, between the speaking subject and meaning itself. The boy narrates, or repeats others' words, without fully understanding them, leaving the reader to attempt, never quite successfully, the act of pinning down meaning that the narrator cannot complete on his own.

3.5. *Text as the Product of an Epochal Culture*

Every text is rooted in a particular culture and time period, and "The Sisters" is deeply grounded in, and cannot be understood apart from, the religious and cultural language of turn-of-the-century Catholic Ireland. Terms such as *simony* and *chalice*, together with the vocabulary of the Mass, are not incidental period detail; they are load-bearing elements of the text's semantic structure. *Simony*, the sin of trafficking in sacred things, appears in the opening triad of strange words precisely because it will, by the story's end, resonate against the implied moral corruption or failure attributed to Father Flynn. [2] The broken chalice is at once a literal object (the proximate cause, perhaps, of the priest's mental collapse) and a symbol whose theological resonance, the vessel of consecration damaged, extends the story's concern with breakdown, corruption, and failed transmission from the narrowly personal to the broadly ecclesiastical and social.

In this sense, these terms go beyond their strict theological meanings and take on a broader, symbolic weight, one that could be called socially "paralytic": the spiritual and institutional stagnation of an entire Dublin community, dominated by priests, provincial, and morally timid, is compressed into the physical and mental paralysis of one old priest. This is exactly the kind of cultural anchoring that the theoretical framework anticipates: the text cannot be fully understood through language alone, and grasping its complete meaning requires drawing on the cultural and historical context in which it was written.

3.6. *Genre Embedding: The Journalistic Death Notice*

The most structurally revealing textual detail is a small, easily overlooked fragment that constitutes a genuine instance of embedded genre: the formal death notice that the boy reads pinned to the door of the priest's house: [2]

July 1st, 1895

The Rev. James Flynn (formerly of S. Catherine's Church, Meath Street), aged sixty-five years. R. I. P.

This is not artistic discourse but a fragment of journalistic discourse, specifically the genre of the public death or mourning notice, the kind of text that would have appeared, in substantially similar form, in the death columns of a contemporary Dublin newspaper. Within the classification of discourse types outlined above, [1] the genres of journalistic discourse include reportage and the newspaper article, and the public notice belongs to this same documentary register. It is characterized by terseness, formulaic structure, and, crucially, denotative completeness: full name, former ecclesiastical post, precise age, and exact date, with no ambiguity, no euphemism, and no

aposiopesis. A reader identifies this fragment as a death notice almost instantly, independent of its specific content, because genre conventions carry their own recognizable signals of form and register that cue an addressee into a particular interpretive frame before the propositional content is even processed. [4] This is exactly what makes its embedding within Joyce's narrative so jarring and so legible as a formal intrusion.

The importance of this embedded fragment comes entirely from how sharply it contrasts with everything around it. Within "The Sisters" as a whole, it stands out as the one moment where denotation is fully achieved: the signifier is tied completely and cleanly to a concrete, verifiable referent. Every other discursive act in the story (Cotter's hedging, Eliza's circumlocutions, the boy's own unfinished apprehensions) is defined by the withholding of denotation. The oral, communal discourse of Dublin operates by systematically declining to complete the act of naming, whereas the printed, public, journalistic notice operates by the opposite principle, achieving completeness as a matter of generic convention.

This single instance of journalistic discourse thus functions, within the text, almost as a rebuke to the rest of the narrative's linguistic economy. It demonstrates in miniature what unambiguous denotation looks like and, by doing so, throws into sharp relief just how thoroughly the surrounding community discourse is organized around evasion. The genre of the public record stands, quite literally, on the same door as the entrance to a house of private, evasive gossip. The gap between the two genres is, in effect, the story's entire thematic argument compressed into a formal, textual detail.

3.7. Summary of Findings

Table 1. Levels of linguistic organization and their effect on denotation in "The Sisters"

Level of analysis	Textual evidence	Effect on denotation
Lexical	Opening triad <i>paralysis</i> , <i>gnomon</i> , <i>simony</i> presented as unattached signifiers	Signifiers circulate without a stable denotatum
Syntactic	Aposiopesis in Cotter's speech ("something queer...")	Syntactic incompleteness mirrors semantic incompleteness
Dialogic	Eliza's circumlocution and euphemism ("affected," "too scrupulous always")	Surface cohesion is preserved; coherence is deferred
Intersubjective	A narrator who does not grasp the meaning of what he reports	Interpretive work passes to the reader
Cultural	Religious vocabulary (<i>simony</i> , <i>chalice</i>)	Terms acquire symbolic weight beyond their theological sense
Generic	Embedded death notice (journalistic discourse)	Only instance of complete denotation; throws the rest into relief

4. Conclusion

Read through the lens of text linguistics, "The Sisters" emerges as a text that is remarkably self-reflexive about its own linguistic condition. Its opening gesture, the presentation of unanchored signifiers (*paralysis*, *gnomon*, *simony*), establishes from the outset a structural project that the rest of the narrative pursues: a sustained, never fully resolved movement toward denotation. This movement is reinforced by a systematic weakening of cohesive devices in dialogue, such that syntactic incompleteness mirrors and enacts semantic incompleteness. It is complicated by an intersubjective structure in which the narrating subject himself lacks full possession of the meaning he transmits. It is grounded in the specific religious-cultural vocabulary of Catholic Dublin, which supplies the story's central terms with a symbolic resonance beyond their narrow theological sense. Finally, it is

thrown into relief by a single embedded instance of journalistic discourse, the death notice, whose denotative completeness exposes, by contrast, the evasiveness that governs everything else in the text.

Joyce's story is therefore not primarily a story about a priest's death; it is a story about the structural insufficiency of language to fully deliver reality, about the perpetual, and here thematized, gap between what a sign can mean and what it can, in any given instance, be made to denote. This is not merely a thematic observation, but one realized at every level of the text's linguistic organization: lexical, syntactic, dialogic, generic, and cultural. In this sense "The Sisters" offers an unusually precise literary instantiation of the theoretical claim with which this paper began: that a text is not a static container of meaning but the linguistic dimension of discourse, produced by a subject, addressed to an addressee, embedded in a culture, and organized around categories (cohesion, denotation, genre) whose very fragility, when deliberately exploited, becomes the vehicle of literary meaning itself.

The relevance of these findings is twofold. For literary analysis, they show that the categories of text linguistics can explain how a literary text produces meaning through its form and not only through its theme. For text linguistics, they show that categories such as cohesion and denotation can be tested productively on texts that exploit them rather than simply fulfil them. Because the analysis is confined to a single story, further research could examine whether the same operation structures other stories in *Dubliners*.

Data Availability

No new datasets were generated or analysed in this study. The analysis is based on the published text of James Joyce's short story "The Sisters" (from *Dubliners*), cited in the References.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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