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“Country Speech”: Regional and Temporal Linguistic Layering in Alice Munro’s Fiction

ABSTRACT

Foregrounded reports of remembered speech habits typify Alice Munro’s short fiction. In one story, the author refers to this, almost casually, as “country speech.” I will examine instances of generalized speech tags (such as “As they used to say”) to explore their relation to the creation of spatial and temporal depth in the fictional landscape. Distinctions are established between types of these foregrounded speech tags, and the category of “country speech” is extended to include a related concept of “country manners.” These combine to help create the subtly layered distinctions between place (city, country, small town) and time (decades and generations) that add texture to Munro’s narratives.

Keywords: Alice Munro, Canadian Literature, short fiction, stylistics

»Podeželski govor«: regionalna in časovna jezikovna večplastnost v kratki prozi Alice Munro

IZVLEČEK

V kratki prozi Alice Munro je v ospredje postavljeno poročanje o govornih navadah, ki se jih junaki zgodb spominjajo. V eni izmed zgodb avtorica to – skoraj brezbrizno – imenuje »podeželski govor«. Prispevek analizira primere generaliziranih spremnih stavkov (npr. »Kot so včasih rekli«) in razišče, kakšna je njihova vloga pri ustvarjanju prostorske in časovne globine v fiktivni pokrajini. Prispevek prav tako vpelje razlikovanje med različnimi vrstami spremnih stavkov in razširi kategorijo »podeželskega govora«, tako da le-ta vključuje soroden koncept »podeželskih manir«. Oboje skupaj ustvari tenkočutno večplastno razlikovanje med prostorom (veliko mesto, podeželje, malo mesto) in časom (desetletja in generacije), ki pripovedim Alice Munro dajejo teksturo.

Ključne besede: Alice Munro, kanadska književnost, kratka proza, stilistika

1 Introduction

“As they used to say” or “As people said” – these phrases or similar variants pass virtually unnoticed in Alice Munro’s fiction. Since Munro’s oeuvre is rooted in place (predominantly southwestern Ontario) and time (specific decades of the 20th century), it is unsurprising to find overt references to the distinctive idiom of a region or a generation, the “country speech” (Munro 1998, *Love of a Good Woman*, 47) that may need introduction, apology or even decoding for the reader.

However, these suspension phrases, or generalized speech tags, mark an overlooked feature of Munro’s fiction, whether they appear in the past or present tense. Phrases like “as they say” and “what people around here are apt to call” introduce polyphony into the narrative discourse, allowing alternative voices to break through. These voices often, but not invariably, represent what Munro herself has called “country speech.” Such moments evoke the stylistic and syntactic phrasing of another, usually unnamed, speaker, often collective, and take various forms, which will be defined, illustrated, and explicated to explore their layering effect in Munro’s narratives. I will consider the stories as a text corpus rather than interpreting them individually.

2 Narratives of Place and Time

In an interview with Geoff Hancock, Munro denied being a regional writer (Hancock 1987, 200); this demurrer must be negotiated by any critic discussing region or place in her oeuvre.¹ Nevertheless, Reingard Nischik (2007) affirms “regional attachments” as being among the three main characteristics of her writing. Maria Löschnigg also confronts the issue, maintaining that place constitutes “the major linking device” (2014, 21) in groups of Munro stories. This is especially relevant for the collections that have been read as “story cycles” (*Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978) and *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971)). From the more distanced perspective of European critics such as Nischik and Löschnigg, it could be easier to interpret the narratives as providing a “map” of a particular Canadian region, southwestern Ontario bordering Lake Huron (Nischik 2007, 203). However, the two-dimensional concept of mapping needs to be corrected with the addition of the dimension of time. Munro’s narratives commonly offer the illusion of a credible voice telling an autobiographical story about something that happened not just in another place – a rural place, long left behind – but also in a distant time – a childhood similarly distant. The sense of distance is imbricated with both the spatial and temporal removal, which produces, as in stories told by migrants, a preoccupation with a personal story of origin. Löschnigg identifies this as an “almost obsessive engagement with places of origin” (2014, 46), which includes analysis of individual-community interaction and issues of otherness (2014, 47).

The nexus of time and place forms the main topic of a recent Canadian monograph, Ryan Porter’s *You Can’t Get There from Here: The Past as Present in Small-Town Ontario Fiction* (2019).

¹ Although, as Joanne McCaig points out, Munro once bowed to pressure in an interview and admitted that IF she were a regional writer, then that region aligned with the American south because of the rural setting and the Scots-Irish origin of the inhabitants (McCaig 2002, 39-40).

Dealing with Munro alongside Stephen Leacock, Robertson Davies and Jane Urquhart, Porter defines the common features of memorialized distance:

Small towns in Ontario’s literature are often portrayed as repositories of time-honoured values, as natural or organic communities, as antiquated counterparts to a degraded, urban modernity, and as places infused with traditional wisdom that stretch back into the mists of time: places that harbor a qualitative difference from life in the modern city. (Porter 2019, 8)

In further analyzing Munro’s work, Porter highlights the phrase “country life” in the story “Simon’s Luck.” To Porter, this phrase, used by the characters with ironic self-mockery, “bookends” the life stories of Rose and Simon (Porter 2019, 135). “Country life,” as we will see, constitutes the acceptable, cosmopolitan version of what will be analyzed here as “country speech” and “country manners.”

3 Generalized Speech Tags

The pattern of country speech can be introduced with three clear examples of generalized speech tags, the syntactical structure to which I am referring, which are indicated in bold below:

*“Wal if a feller took a notion to, **they said.** They really said that. (“The Beggar Maid” in *Who Do You Think You Are?* 1996, 107)*

*“Talking back” **it was called.** (“Dear Life” 2013, 306)*

*Or beating the tar out of me, **as people would cheerfully say back then.** (“Dear Life” 2013, 317)*

In each of these cases, the phrase produces the illusion of realistic linguistic reporting. Some people, even many people, perhaps even almost everybody said this phrase. The past tense is another commonality in these three examples; whatever the wording, this is something that people no longer say, according to the story’s narrator. Past tense is expressed with the simple past, or with the modal formation “would say” to indicate habitual usage in a past time. The second example from “Dear Life” even provides the time frame: “back then.” This vague indicator covers a vast potential sweep of past time. The only real time location is that the era exists in the past of the narrator, probably during their lifetime, because memory is invoked. By relying on auditory witness, the narrator cements their intradiegetic position, and implies distance in time and, less tangibly, in place.

There are three distinct ways of identifying the utterers of these tags: 1) the passive voice (“it was called”); 2. the third-person plural pronoun (“they”), and 3) the noun “people.” With slight variations, these three types cover almost all examples from Munro’s stories. This linguistic feature establishes the “qualitative difference” that Porter found between remembered life in small towns and adopted life in the metropolis (Porter 2019, 8). It is necessary to grasp the function of these speech tags and sample their range of usage and occurrence.

Quirk et al. set out the structure and semantic functions of these comment clauses (Quirk et al. 1985, 1114); not all of these functions are evident in this sample from Munro’s work.

The following five further examples of distancing suspensions display the usual pattern: the generalized speaker, the auditory memory, and the capture of special habits of speech:

“Going to Morrisville, **they say.**” (“Before the Change” in *The Love of a Good Woman* 1998, 331)

“So-and-so digs with the wrong foot, **they would say.** She digs with the wrong foot. That was **what they would say** about Nora. (“Walker Brothers Cowboy” in *Dance of the Happy Shades* 1988, 14)

“Maiden ladies, **they were called.** Old Maids was too thin a term, it would not cover them. (“Chaddeleys and Flemings” “Connection” in *The Moons of Jupiter* 1986, 1)

“**That’s what they say here,** isn’t it? Steamed up?” (“Monsieur les Deux Chapeaux” in *The Progress of Love* 1995, 90)

“Up and down,” **they used to say** in her childhood, talking of the health of people who weren’t going to recover. “Ah. She’s up and down.” (“Dulse” in *The Moons of Jupiter* 1986, 59)

The first two examples involve specific cultural usages that might be opaque to outsiders and to younger generations. Morrisville is where people are sent for mental problems, thus the dismissive tone of “Going to Morrisville.” The phrase encapsulates a prudish attitude towards mental illness, a smug community agreement that out of sight could be out of mind. “Digging with the wrong foot” is an even more obscure reference to being a Roman Catholic. The Protestant/Catholic divide often hovers in the background of Munro’s southwestern Ontario, nowhere more obviously than in this coded slur against Nora. These two speech tags allow the narrator to create both small-town attitudes and a safe distance from them.

The third example from “Monsieur les Deux Chapeaux” clearly indicates a difference in place with the word “here” (“That’s what they say **here**” my emphasis), while the fourth one emphasizes temporal distance instead. The tag “they used to say in her childhood” is unusually forthright about the narrator’s relation to this remembered snippet of local speech. The homodiegetic narrator with a retrospective point of view underlies all five instances of distancing speech tags but is most prominent in the fourth one.

4 Speech Tag Variants

The first variant of this linguistic feature is the personalized speech tag, where an actual person is identified as the habitual speaker of the phrase, as in the three examples below:

the kind that Enid’s mother called “potato Irish.” (“The Love of a Good Woman” in *The Love of a Good Woman* 1998, 32)

She always called her cigarettes ciggie-boos. (“Family Furnishings” in *Hateship* 2002, 78)

Relations performing.

That was Flo’s word for it: perform. (“Privilege” in *Who Do You Think You Are?* 1996, 31)

Despite their identification of a speaker, these speech tags resemble the ones with a generalized speaker because they share some of the function of spatial and temporal distancing, while also contributing to characterization. These three deserve careful analysis.

the kind that Enid's mother called "potato Irish." ("The Love of a Good Woman" in *The Love of a Good Woman* 1998, 32)

"Potato Irish" belongs to a class of derogatory labels used against various waves of immigrants to Canada, in this case to southwestern Ontario. The "Potato" part of the phrase invokes the Potato Famine of 1847–52, which sparked heavy Irish emigration, much of which was to Canada. Irish Catholics entered on the bottom rung of the ethnic and socio-economic ladder. Additionally, the phrase associates the person so labelled with lowly agricultural pursuits and, invariably, rural poverty with its concomitant monotonous diet. In these stories, it probably also connotes Roman Catholicism, since this was perceived as hostile to the dominant Anglican/Presbyterian/Methodist/United Church belief systems (see the early story "Walker Brothers Cowboy"). Through this phrase, we learn something about Enid's mother, her thoughtless prejudice and snobbery, and much about the dominant attitudes of the time and place. Enid's mother could not have used the descriptor unless it also reflected a common community usage and attitude. The distancing here emerges as not just time but also attitude. Society at the time the narrator speaks has undergone an attitude adjustment, not just to the Irish Catholics, who moved up the immigrant ladder long ago, along with the Protestant Irish, but more so to prejudicial ethnic stereotypes. Even in the present tense of the story, Enid's mother is singled out for her usage, and from the point of view of the narrator, the phrase needs corrective distancing.

She always called her cigarettes ciggie-boos. ("Family Furnishings" in *Hateship* 2002, 78)

Alfrida, the "career girl" cousin from "Family Furnishings" is the user of the flip phrase *ciggie-boos*. The infantile nickname conjures a complex of attitudes on Alfrida's part to her nicotine addiction, and her use of it to construct a persona of careless, cynical sophistication. However, the young narrator has reached the point where she can deconstruct the projected persona and its linguistic script. This instance shows that a Munro reader must carefully distinguish between usages like this and places where direct speech from the past is simply reported. This word is not allowed to exist on the same plane as the other dialogue; the narrator singles it out, raises it above the flow of dialogue, distances it from the narrator's own usage and thus from our sense of normative linguistic usage in the setting. In this case, the word becomes part of Alfrida's idiolect, which in turn is part of her life-long performance. Alfrida aspires to a chic, cosmopolitan self and uses such phrases to distinguish herself from small-town speech, attitudes and socio-economic realities. Self-mockery can be afforded by those who have moved away from what Porter calls the small-town "restrictive behavioural code" (Porter 2019, 135).

Relations performing.

That was Flo's word for it: *perform*. ("Privilege" in *Who Do You Think You Are?* 1996, 31)

In the third example, the speaker is a major character in the story and the story cycle. This is Flo, the stepmother around whom many fictional episodes swirl. The normally taciturn Flo has begun to speak, and her flat locutions need special foregrounding. The narrator cannot be satisfied with the first utterance but must repeat the odd usage and attribute it to Flo specifically, as with Enid's mother in the potato Irish usage. The verb *perform* as used by Flo describes both the juvenile, incestuous sex act taking place in the school toilet and, according to Flo, all the perverse conjunctions to be found in remote country districts. The diction choice strips the sexual act of romance or pleasure and reduces it to spectacle. In the case of Shorty and Franny McGill, the brother and sister "performing" for money in the schoolyard, it has become literally a spectacle, one at which the narrator herself was present. In Flo's mouth, *perform* becomes more than a euphemism current within a community that cannot say *have sex*, or *copulate* or their coarser four-letter relatives, but a dismissal of the ontological presence of the act. As performance, the act signifies the gender performance that marks the normative heterosexuality of the community but calls into question the very existence of the reality that is being performed. This goes beyond mere country speech to indicate a broader set of country attitudes, ones inimical to the rose-tinted "country life" of "Simon's Luck." Rose, the narrator, notes the odd usage, attaching it particularly to Flo and not to the wider community. A word like this allows Flo to discuss the unmentionable with her stepdaughter, while capturing the negation associated with the absence of sex as a social experience in that small town.

Elsewhere, Flo is reported using non-standard grammar in other ways – an incorrect past participle, for instance:

... another man who hanged himself using a chain, the kind of chain you hook on a tractor with, so it was a wonder his head was not torn off.

Tore off, **Flo said**. ("The Beggar Maid" in *Who Do You Think You Are?* 1996, 208)

As in the case of *perform*, the narrator deliberately allows the echo; the verb first appears in standard form, then is repeated to capture the flavour of Flo's discourse, since these are her oral stories that the narrator is reporting. This clarification creates immediacy and evokes the force and authenticity of Flo's storytelling by allowing her dialect to surface briefly within the flow of standard English. The pattern is not derogatory to the character; instead, it does justice to Flo by permitting her voice to emerge from the substrate of the past and the country.

This variant of the Munroian speech tag personalizes the usage, while still separating it from the narrator. The attributed locution becomes part of characterization, in some cases of a distinctive idiolect (as with Flo and Alfrida). In each of the three examples, the narrator foregrounds the usage with the distancing speech tag, allowing the reader the impression of a parallel linguistic universe running behind the narrator's own plausible voice. This makes the narrator into a type of interpreter, a translator of lived idiolect into the voice of the story. These speech tags, therefore, create the effect of layered voices almost of heteroglossia, where the idiolectal country speech functions as a substrate to the narrator's safely cosmopolitanized discourse. Munro's technique differentiates her practice from that of the local colour story of the American short-fiction writer Kate Chopin, for instance. Were an entire Munro story to

have been narrated by Flo, it would shift decisively towards local colour. Instead, this usage of well-placed speech tags assists in constructing the multiply textured voice of the Munro stories, what Löschnigg calls “counter-realistic deep mapping” (2014, 21).

5 Regional Dialect and Accent

Having established Munro’s distinctive use of speech tags in creating temporal and spatial distance between the narrator and remembered experience, we can now enlarge the view of “country speech” to include the plainest level at which she represents regional accent and/or dialect. As established, there is no place in her fiction where there is anything like the extended evocation of regional language varieties that characterized the regional writers of the early 20th century, no extended passages of country characters speaking in country dialect. The most direct representation of the phenomenon is the occasional reference to non-standard pronouns and verb forms. In the story “The Eye,” for instance, there is talk of teaching Sadie the hired girl not to say “youse” (*Dear Life* 2013, 260), and in “A Queer Streak” the narrator suddenly notices how her family speaks: “Weren’t they saying ‘youse’ on purpose, to sound funny?” (“A Queer Streak” in *The Progress of Love* 1995, 283). In another story, the second-person pronoun emerges as “yez”:

“In the town I come from,” Rose said, exaggerating, “**everybody says yez**. What’ll yez have? How’re yez doin.”

“Yez?”

“Youse. It’s the plural of you.”

(“Mischief” in *Who Do You Think You Are?* 1996, 126)

Another pronoun appears in non-standard form in the speech of the narrator’s father. This is a reflexive pronoun:

Till **my father would say** with embarrassment, and oblique reproach, “He seems to get on all right by hisself.”

If his relatives had not been present, he would more likely have said “himself.” (“Family Furnishings” in *Hateship* 2002, 80)

This example offers an explanation for the non-standard usage: it is conditional on the presence of family. The father reverts to a usage from his childhood, one that mimics a usage common among his family and community. For him, this represents a word from the past but for the relatives, *hisself* is a commonplace even in current discourse. Presumably, the father’s usage is partly diplomatic, as he avoids making a distinction between his way of speaking and theirs. It is an expression of solidarity, not just with language, but with values, too. Löschnigg discusses this pronoun variant at length, interpreting it to indicate the father’s fear of being considered arrogant (2014, 44). This identifies the situation as revealing one of the “merciless codes” that must be observed in the rural community (Löschnigg 2014, 44). The existence of such codes, of self-censorship or even silence, marks the difference between country speech and its opposite.

Differences are not always syntactical or lexical: sometimes “country speech” emerges in pronunciation. For example, “White Dump,” a story set in the Ottawa Valley (one of the few Canadian locations west of the Maritimes with a distinctive local accent), singles out some local usages as marked: “**they talked as they did, saying**, “We-ez goen to towen,” and “bowt” (“White Dump” in *The Progress of Love* 1995, 389). In this case, it is primarily the accent that is non-standard.

6 Country Discourse

As previously hinted, the matrix of country speech in Munro’s fiction is **country discourse**, a phenomenon sometimes evoked directly in her stories but just as often reflected through its antithesis, the urban, educated discourse of people who have left the small town or rural district for wider horizons. Many critics have noted and commented on this, for example Nischik, as she discusses the family “stuck in conventional thought patterns” in the early story “Boys and Girls” (Nischik 2007, 210). Marlene Goldman (1990) also touches on the familial discourse that conspires to delimit girls’ opportunities. Löschnigg identifies silence as the defining element of this discourse: “Codes of silence, and absences of signifying meaning, also play an important role in Munro’s depiction of difference against the backdrop of closely knit small-town communities” (Löschnigg 2014, 28). Munro’s narrators call attention to discourse in the form of marking difference; only where discourse differs is there a need for comment. As the narrator says about their visitor, Mr. Florence, in “The Progress of Love,” “he [an outsider] wasn’t used to our way of talking” (*The Progress of Love* 1995, 16). If the generalized speech tags first discussed could appear inconsequential or contingent, then their placement within this wider framework cements their importance as boundary markers in the mapping of “here” and “there” both temporally and spatially in Munro’s oeuvre. As Raymond Williams reminded us, “‘country’ and ‘city’ are very powerful words, and this is not surprising when we remember how much they seem to stand for in the experience of human communities” (Williams 1973, 1). Moreover, it is in language and discourse that such polarities are created and negotiated. Country speech only becomes manifest when a gap has been opened between it and its opposite: the cosmopolitan world of Standard Canadian English and normative readerly expectation.

“Country speech” (“Love of a Good Woman” 1998) and country discourse in Munro’s work have a behavioural equivalent in the phrase “country manners” (“The Progress of Love” in *The Progress of Love* 1995, 1; “Hateship, Friendship” in *Hateship* 2002, 6), and even in “family ways”: “My father returned to family ways” (“Images” in *Dance of the Happy Shades* 1988, 34). These concepts all coalesce around that gap between the narrative present and the memorialized past. Once beyond individual speakers and generalized speech tags, we can anatomize the phenomenon in a more holistic way.

The distinctive elements of country discourse break down into three categories: verbal reticence; predictability (restricted and familiar usage); and proverbial wisdom to clinch arguments and represent ethical positions. We will take these in order.

Verbal reticence: This feature of Munro’s stories can be difficult to pin down, requiring as it does the observation of what is not said rather than of what is. It receives considerable attention

in Löschnigg's discussion of "firmly established codes of silence and secrecy" (2014, 46). An extreme example emerges in the farm sisters from the two-part story "Chaddeleys and Flemings." The sisters – Susan, Clara, Lizzie, Maggie, Annie and Jennet (who died) – center the second part, titled "The Stone in the Field." "Work would be what filled their lives," opines the narrator, "not conversation" ("The Stone in the Field" in *The Moons of Jupiter* 1986, 26). Since this category of discourse involves an absence, it is worth quoting an entire paragraph:

What was to be said? The aunts, like those who engage in a chat with royalty, would venture no remarks of their own, but could answer questions. They offered no refreshments. It was clear that only a great effort of will kept them all from running away and hiding, like Aunt Susan, who never did reappear while we were there. What was felt in that room was the pain of human contact. I was hypnotized by it. The fascinating pain; the humiliating necessity. ("The Stone in the Field" in *The Moons of Jupiter* 1986, 27)

Although this taciturn, reclusive behaviour is acknowledged as extreme even for this community (and likely to have been pathologized in a contemporary setting), the story depicts it as part of a spectrum of silence and silencing, on which the narrator positions herself at the end of the twin stories. A life of verbal absence and avoidance leaves few records, not even the lost grave stone of the story's second section. Munro's narrators sometimes take up the challenge of voicing this community silence, often gendered, and of documenting what strangled substrate survives time and distance to document traces of this more genuine version of country life.

Predictability: this category of country discourse refers primarily to lexis, although sometimes to syntax or even tone. Using the words and expressions that everyone knows marks one as an insider to the small community. Using fancy words makes one alien. The predictability of utterance is evident, for example, when the father in "Voices" engages in code-switching because "he understood that the thing to do was never to say anything special" ("Voices" in *Dear Life* 2013, 290). The restriction to the predictable can result in discourse that is opaque to outsiders. Here is the farm girl, Helen, from "Floating Bridge":

"You picked a hot enough day to be out in," she said. It was the sort of thing she might have heard people say to start a conversation. She spoke in a hard, flat tone of antagonism and distrust, but even that, Jinny knew by now, should not be taken personally. It was just the way some people sounded – particularly country people – in this part of the world. ("Floating Bridge" in *Hateship* 2002, 54)

Moreover, in the story "Fits," we hear that in the country, "much of conversation is repetition" (*The Progress of Love* 1995, 140), which is later elaborated into the observation that "At that time he [the newcomer] had a very faulty comprehension of Gilmore vocabulary" ("Fits" 1995, 141).

A prescribed repetition and familiarity go together with a straitened vocabulary. This does not mean merely exclusion of the complicated and the Latinate. In the story "Wood," for instance, even the commonplace word "forest" sounds strange to the rural protagonist; the simple six-

letter word was unthinkable until after his dangerous experience in the wood. The ordeal has altered that common assemblage of trees into “forest”: “*Forest*. That’s the word. Not a strange word at all but one he has possibly never used” (“Wood” in *Too Much Happiness* 2009, 245).

In the story “Jesse and Meribeth” the unspeakable word is “menstrual,” as distinct from local usage, which would refer instead to “monthlies” or even “the curse” (“Jesse and Meribeth” in *The Progress of Love* 1995, 223). Similar prudish diction crops up in “Accident” where the sister-in-law cannot say “penis” but has to use the euphemism “pecker.” “She had never heard the word *penis*, tried it but couldn’t get used to it. *Pecker*, she said. *Whipped out his pecker*, she said” (“Accident” in *The Moons of Jupiter* 1986, 95). These examples of restricted vocabulary are associated with the prudishness that accompanied church-going people in a small, vigilant community that self-censored its conversation. As the narrator says in “Royal Beatings,” “we were all most prudish people” (“Royal Beatings”, in *Who Do You Think You Are?* 1996, 5). The words for sexuality and reproduction have a parallel lexicon in country discourse; country speakers may know the official equivalent but would not use it publicly. This is not mere prudishness but a strategy for policing gender boundaries and disallowing certain attitudes deemed citified.

Proverbial wisdom: the third category within country discourse comprises sayings and proverbs. These sometimes occur in the mouths of Munro’s characters as strategies for shutting down argument, for having the last word. They suggest what Porter calls “reverence for the past” in his study of small-town Ontario fiction (2019, 8). “How I Met My Husband” offers a clear example, easily overlooked in our appreciation for the “digressive unfolding of the narrative” (Gadpaille 1989, 60):

“Have a house without a pie, be shamed until you die,” my mother used to say ...
 (“How I Met My Husband” in *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You* 1990, 46)

The finality of the pronouncement has the presumed effect of shutting down argument. It replaces discussion with an inarguable proposition. Munro’s narrators absorb the habit of quotation as a means of interpreting everyday experience, but these younger women often access other forms of verbal wisdom, poetry in particular.

7 Contrasting Discourse Systems

In later stories, Munro sometimes offers clarifying summations of the difference between two kinds of conversational discourse: country speech and its cosmopolitan opposite. The story “Passion” devotes a whole paragraph to Grace’s careful observations about conversation. A smart but inexperienced country girl, Grace notes the distinction between conversational habits at the Travers’ house and those in her own small-town community:

People [at the Travers’] told amusing stories, in which the joke was often on themselves (... Where she came from, most of the lively conversation took the form of dirty jokes, which of course her aunt and uncle did not go in for. On the rare occasions when they had company, there was praise of and apology for the food, discussion of the weather, and a fervent wish for the meal to be finished as soon as possible). (“Passion” in *Runaway* 2005, 168)

This passage offers a clear distinction between a domestic milieu where verbal exchange is brief and restricted in subject, and another family milieu where conversation functions to express individuality and reveal wit and intellect. The difference lies partly in the city/country divide, partly in the level of education and class expectations. Young Grace, from a tradesman's family, finds the discourse difference at the Travers' a challenge at first, but discovers that she can learn the rules of this game with ease.

Note that there is a terminological asymmetry here: what to call this "game" of cosmopolitan family discourse. Naming country discourse has been easy, largely because Munro herself provided the phrasings "country speech" ("The Love of a Good Woman" 1998, 47) and "country manners," and addressed the phenomenon directly, as in this early story: "'Well,' This is a habit of country people, old people, to say 'Well,' meaning, 'is that so?' with a little extra politeness and concern" ("Walker Brothers Cowboy" in *Dance of the Happy Shades* 1988, 12). This brief passage unites temporal and spatial distance around one simple speech habit – not diction, but pragmatic usage; the pattern of country speech is evident. More difficult, however, has been naming the opposite type of discourse that throws country speech into relief. Occasionally, the citified form of discourse is mocked in Munro's stories, as in the phrase "country life" from the story "Simon's Luck" (*Who Do You Think You Are?* 1996). In context, this summarizes all the things that city people think life in the country will be like; it has a glossy, comfortable connotation that ignores the rugged reality of dirt roads and outdoor toilets.

One convenient way of capturing the antithesis of country discourse appears in a surprising phenomenon: the compound or hyphenated words that Munro places strategically to signal values and attitudes. There exists a set of similar phrases that disparage anything not springing from country discourse. These include the use of "hotshot" in "Family Furnishings" to disparage the reading of classic novels (*Hateship* 2002, 89), and the closely related "High-Hat" in "Powers": "He somehow thinks it's too High-Hat" (*Runaway* 2005, 282). "Airy-fairy" conjures up the same level of contempt in the story "Soon": "He might use the word airy-fairy" (*Runaway* 2005, 115), and in "The Bear Came over the Mountain" (*Hateship* 2002, 277). A similar usage is the adjective "fangle-dangle" in "Postcard," where one family betrays their outsider status by their choice of garment for a child's christening: "one of them long fangle-dangle christening robes" ("Postcard" in *Dance of the Happy Shades* 1988, 131).

This list comprises the negative judgments of the 'country people' in the stories. The compounds drip with contempt and assign triviality to anything not comprehended within the allowed subjects of country discourse. Munro's country is not isolated from the modern world; things intrude – classical music and literature, even paintings. Löschnigg offers an extended reading of the Chagall painting *I and the Village* that is rejected by the country family in "Soon" (Löschnigg 2014, 41–44). This is an instance where country discourse receives extended consideration in relation to one story, which is not my aim here, since the stories are treated as a text corpus. Across her oeuvre, Munro's protagonists usually negotiate the switch between discourse types, often uncomfortably and with keen awareness of the "monstrous snobbery" that the switch can entail ("The Peace of Utrecht" in *Dance of the Happy Shades* 1988, 192).

8 Conclusion

Despite the terminological asymmetry, the binary between country speech and its foil emerges clearly when one considers Alice Munro's fiction as a whole. Its existence and foregrounded nature are inarguable, given the author's acute self-awareness in the matter.

"Country speech" ("The Love of a Good Woman" 1998, 47), though never the dominant narratorial language, yet shadows the stories, running parallel as a linguistic substrate that surfaces strategically to create temporal and spatial difference and to contribute to the sense of depth and multivocality in Munro's fiction. Thus, even stories with single, homodiegetic narrative focalisation nevertheless radiate a sense of multiplicity in a voice that Nischik has called "Joycean" (Nischik 2007, 208).

I acknowledge the distortion that is the inevitable result of treating Munro's oeuvre as a corpus of linguistic usages, rather than focusing on one story, one collection, or a set of related stories for a more nuanced analysis. However, the findings in this stylistic treatment of country speech deserve to be extended in future to explore their implications for individual stories. Moreover, the identification of this category, with the concomitant dialectal and pronunciation instances in some stories, has implications for future translation of Munro's fiction. An awareness of the phenomenon of country speech could aid translators in capturing consistent target language equivalents. Overall, the identification of this pattern of speech tags leads to cognizance of the phenomenon of country speech, to the broader concept of country discourse and to its opposite. This alerts us to a conflict energizing these fictions of distanced reminiscence, one operating even in negation and absence. As the narrator says in the remarkable story "Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage": "She [Joanna] didn't have country manners – in fact, she had no manners at all" (*Hateship* 2002, 6).

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