SYNTAGMATIC AND PARADIGMATIC RELATIONS

in Grace Paley's *Wants*

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Abstract. The article discusses the role of immanent structuralist analysis in relation to other, more contemporary approaches to literary study. Jurij Lotman's version of structuralism, in particular, is examined, and it is argued that his concept of the artistic text provides a model that is structural, yet flexible, allowing the analyst to abide by the text's structure without reducing all of the interpretation to that structure. We take Grace Paley's story *Wants* as an object through which to highlight these points. In addition, we provide a thorough analysis of the story, which may serve as a working interpretive framework to be carried forward into further studies of Paley's fiction.

Keywords: structure, text, syntagmatic, paradigmatic, Lotman, Grace Paley, Saussure

Süntagmaatilised ja paradigmaatilised suhted Grace Paley novellis "Wants"

Abstrakt. Artiklis uuritakse immanentse strukturalistliku analüüsi rolli teiste, kirjanduse uurimise nüüdisaegsemate lähenemiste kõrval. Konkreetsemalt uuritakse Juri Lotmani strukturalistlikku lähenemist, väites, et tema arusaam kunstilisest tekstist annab paindliku strukturalistliku analüüsimudeli, mis võimaldab uurijal järgida teksti struktuuri, redutseerimata kõiki tõlgendusi sellele struktuurile. Selle teema näitlikustamiseks uurime Grace Paley novelli "Wants". Selle tulemusena pakutakse antud novelli põhjalik analüüs, mis võiks toimida tõlgendusliku raamistikuna, mida kasutada autori loomingu edasisel uurimisel.

Märksõnad: struktuur, tekst, süntagmaatika, paradigmaatika, Juri Lotman, Grace Paley, Ferdinand de Saussure
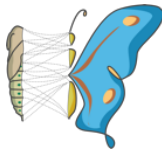
Professional criticism of Grace Paley's fiction has focused on relations between the work and the author's identity as a Jewish American, a woman, a feminist, a socialist, an activist, a revolutionary, and a New Yorker. While such analyses have been fruitful in various ways — in helping to determine whether there exists a genre of Jewish American fiction (Baumgarten 1993), in making sociological comparisons between the situation of cultural minorities in urban space (Goffman 2000), in understanding the immigrant experience in America (Aarons 1987) — they have avoided a more fundamental question. They reach beyond the borders of the work itself to find meaning within it. This principle of *crossing the border* is common to many methods of contemporary literary analysis and has likewise been refuted by many schools. To list briefly a few most prominent members of the opposition — the American New Critics, structuralism, generally considered, and the Russian Formalists. Each of these traditions sought to preserve the integrity of the literary object and in its own way to study literature as literature. The situation in 1960-70s France is of particular interest because it is somewhat paradoxical. At the same time that Barthes and others were proclaiming the death of the author, the notion of intertextuality was being championed as a more perfect model for textual analysis. But intertextuality and reading for authorial intention are related in that both require the critic to bring extra-textual realisations to the reading in order to understand the meaning of a text.

The fieriness of these debates seems to have cooled in recent decades, and plurality as a general feature of meaning is mostly acknowledged. 'Interpretation' is increasingly used to describe the reading process, which places an emphasis on the reader and her subjective ability to make sense of a text. *What is your interpretation?* has become the question, not *What does the text mean?* While semiotics has certainly sided with the plurality camp, we must ask, are all meanings of a text equal? I would suggest they are not, or at least that some are more basic than others. Before bringing any new material to a text, be it another text, or an author, we can first understand the primary material on its own terms. The primary material is the one constant in each act of reading. While other meanings bend and float and disappear with the approach of each subjectivity to the text, the same material structure is perceived, I suggest, by each reader, if even only in an unconscious way.

Juri Lotman, whom we may identify with Tartu-Moscow semiotics, provides a model of text that allows us to examine the primary material in exclusion of all else. The approach of this essay will be to use Lotman's model to provide a reading of Grace Paley's story *Wants*. The goal of the analysis will be to provide scholars of American fiction with a structural framework with which to examine other Paley texts. In addition, as *Wants* contains several explicit intertextual references, our analysis will show how the text's structure provides meaning to these references on its own terms; the same holds true for implicit references to Paley's Jewishness, her gender, or age, etc. The goal is not to refute the plurality of the meaning of these references, but rather to reveal how structural meaning is also and already given.
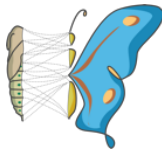
Description of the model

The primary feature of Lotman's model is the external border, which indicates where the text begins and ends and marks its inside as different from its outside (Lotman 1977: 52). This boundary is of prime importance to cultural semioticians who use Lotman's model to textualise phenomena that is not inherently textual. For example, multiple works by a single author, multiple works within a given genre, a set of paintings, and even people may be framed as a text and studied as such; in these cases, the analyst must fix the external border herself. In our investigation we are dealing with a single text in which the boundary is already established. The external border plays another role. It defines the expression of the text; this means that the text is the material realisation of the system and not the system itself. This distinction is crucial to understanding Lotman's model, and I will use the terms 'text' and 'system' advisedly in this essay.

This distinction, however, also becomes blurry, as we will see later. The system of which the text is a realisation may be called, most broadly, 'the language of art,' though this term is deceptive in that it suggests only one system. In fact, for Lotman the language of verbal art is already a hierarchy of at least two systems — natural language and artistic language — and works of art usually entail the presence of many more languages (Lotman 1977: 13); their simultaneous expression in the text is what accounts for the plurality of possible interpretations, already at the level of immanent analysis.

This conception of 'language' is one of the advantages of Lotman's approach. Outside information is allowed to enter the text in the form of an invariant system; this allows the analyst to account for important external considerations, such as the tradition a writer is working within, without tying the interpretation to a number of intertextual references. Rather, the outside information comes into the text as a whole and should be considered in terms of its total effect on the literary object.

Demarcation of the text's material into units is another principal feature of Lotman's model (Lotman 1977: 52). Within the borders of the text, all material enters into well-defined structural units. In the case of verbal texts, which are composed in a natural language, we are given a hierarchy of at least some of these units: the phoneme, the morpheme, the word, the sentence, the paragraph, and so on. Longer works such as novels feature higher-level distinctions such as page breaks or chapters. The highest-level demarcation given in *Wants* is at the level of the paragraph.

A third principal characteristic of the text is its structure, which suggests that the text not only contains demarcated units, but that these units are strictly ordered (Lotman 1977: 53). The structural principles by which this order is attained — syntagmatics and paradigmatics — are of prime importance and deserve our brief attention. We will then arrive at the analysis of Paley's story.
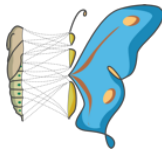
The syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes

At least since the Russian Formalists, literary scholars have been interested in the difference between natural and artistic language (Eichenbaum 1926: 107-108). Roman Jakobson has characterised this difference by considering the function of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations between signs in an artistic text, considered as a product of communication in a natural language. Relying on the Saussurean[6] model of language, he uses the latter's notions of the *syntagmatic* and *associative* relations in a sign system to build his understanding of what is specific to artistic language — though in Jakobson's terminology *syntagma* becomes *combination* and *association* becomes *selection*. He describes artistic language as follows: "The poetic function [of language] projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination" (Jakobson 1987: 71).

For Jakobson, the poetic message is characterised by the temporary ascension of one of language's internal threads over the others and therefore does not represent a real break with any other use of language; the poetic function is always present, albeit subordinated in non-poetic messages, and its dominance in a message is identifiable when the signs are sequentially structured according to principles of equivalence.

For Lotman, the situation is quite different. Verbal art, while appropriating the material of natural language, constitutes and is realised in a completely separate semiotic system: the language of art (Lotman 1977: 9). Nonetheless, Lotman adopts Jakobson's position regarding what we might call the *equivalence in contiguity* principle of artistic texts, though again there is a shift in terminology (Lotman 1977: 78): *selection* becomes *paradigm*, and Saussure's *syntagma* is resurrected in place of Jakobson's *combination*[7].

What the *equivalence in contiguity* principle suggests, for Lotman, is that each element in an artistic text not only exists in some sequence but is also equivalent in some way to every other element in the sequence. A logical conclusion is that each unit of the artistic text may be seen as paradigmatic, not only of every other unit, but of the text as a whole. This indivisible meaning is the organising principle of the entire structure (Lotman 1987: 53). For Lotman, the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes constitute the "structural principles" through which this indivisible meaning can be determined, hence their prime importance. Indeed: "All the structural diversity of the text can be reduced to these principles" (Lotman 1977: 78). Each unit — from the

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[6] While Jakobson credits Saussure for making the initial distinction between these relations (Jakobson 1987: 98), Lotman traces the idea further back to Polish linguist Mikołaj Kruszewski. Lotman, however, credits Jakobson for having first noted the "vital role played by the mutual projection of these two axes in the structure of the poem" (Lotman 1977: 78).

[7] These shifts in terminology indicate deeper theoretical distinctions, but a discussion of them would constitute another paper. We mention them here to show the evolution of Lotman's model and to demonstrate how it differs from Jakobson's.
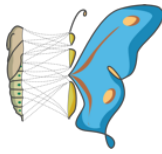
phoneme, where according to Jakobson various articulations are selected and combined to create one sound[8], to the word, in which various morphemes are selected and combined, even to the paragraph, which may be organised on the basis of similarity (each sentence is a repetition of a general idea) and contiguity (sentences are arranged according to a logical sequence) — is related to all other units according to a set of paradigms and also through its position in a certain temporal sequence. The analytical tool provided by the assertion that *all the structural diversity* can be reduced to these two types of relations is incredibly powerful. It becomes something like the zoom function of a camera lens, allowing us to investigate both types of relations on all hierarchical levels of the text.

We must make a distinction here between syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations at the level of system and at the level of text. Saussure's initial description of these relations found them to be elements of *langue*, the system, but he was concerned with whether the syntagm shouldn't properly belong to *parole*, what we might think of analogically as the 'text' in Lotman's theory, because any combination of elements begins to seem like a realisation of the system and not the system itself (Saussure 1959: 124). He arrives at the conclusion that *parole* is characterised by freedom of combination, and that some combinations, though their constituent parts are identifiable as concrete entities in themselves, are not free but rather fixed by tradition ("*bon marché,*" for example) and therefore are constituents of *langue*. He acknowledges, however, the difficulty in making an outright determination; elements of the system tend to become realisations of it, to varying degrees depending on the level of formalisation in culture.

Lotman makes the same discovery, but from the other direction. For Lotman, works of art — texts — are realisations of the language of art; but, they have a "constant tendency to be formalized" and become systems themselves (Lotman 1977: 17). In this view, system and text, rather than being total and mutually exclusive opposites, become the two endpoints of a gradated spectrum, along which sign combinations may be determined to exist. This blurring of the distinction between system and text when it comes to art becomes central to Lotman's larger project and explains why we may talk about the language of the Old Testament entering into *Wants* even though the Old Testament is ostensibly another text and therefore should be excluded from the analysis. Rather, certain invariant relations within the Old Testament have been formalised in culture, such that we may talk about these relations as rules of another system.

Another consequence of searching for syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations at the level of the text is that Saussure's dictum gets turned on its side: the syntagmatic relation is *in praesentia* and the paradigmatic relation is *in praesentia*

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[8] This claim represents an important break with Saussure. Jakobson: "Despite [Saussure's] own insight into the phoneme as a set of concurrent distinctive features, the scholar succumbed to the traditional belief in the linear character of language, 'which excludes the possibility of pronouncing two elements at the same time' " (Jakobson 1987: 99).
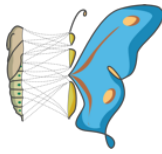
too, as all the elements of the 'system' in question are made present in the text. Structural textual analysis consists in determining these relations.

Grace Paley's *Wants*

In *Wants*, the narrator repeatedly encounters the burdensomeness of familial duty, which is contrasted strongly with her positive attitude toward another type of duty: that which she owes to the community. This dichotomy (community over family) comes to be the central indivisible meaning of the story. Family-as-burden is revealed through her negative attitude toward her sick father, her children, and her husbands, both ex- and present, all of which are contrasted with her positive attitude toward various sorts of communal figures or duty: her appraisal of the librarian, the affinity she feels with the neighbours during breakfast, her desire to be an effective citizen, and in the final triumphant sentences the recognition of the "little sycamores the city had dreamily planted" (Paley 1995: 191). We will illustrate this central dichotomy through a close analysis of the story.

The narrator's negative feelings toward her sick father are revealed through her enumeration of the obstacles she encountered during the marriage to her ex-husband. The series is as follows: "But really, if you remember: first, my father was sick that Friday, then the children were born, then I had those Tuesday night meetings, then the war began" (Paley 1995: 189).

What we have is a set of unlike elements that are brought into a syntagmatic relationship, which establishes a measure of equivalence between them. Each is equal to the rest in that they are all items on a list of obstacles leading to the dissolution of the marriage; they represent a paradigm. Thus, the sick father is a burden just as *war* is also a burden. He is not mentioned again. The children, who here are made equal to *sick father* and *war* are elaborated upon in other parts of the story.

The books, which the narrator has had for "eighteen years," are *The Children* and *The House of Mirth*. An intertextual analysis of the story would look into the content of the real books by Edith Wharton to draw conclusions about their meaning in this text, but the structure of *Wants* already provides the possibility for interpretation.

Furthermore, while the relevance of any intertextual interpretation could be debated, structural meaning is built into the material itself and would remain constant no matter what conclusions an analyst were to draw regarding the relevance of extra-textual references. As Lotman says, meanings "flicker" as different systems are brought to the interpretation (Lotman 1977: 67); continuing the metaphor, we can say that structural meanings are continual sources of light.

"Children" in the title of the book establishes a bond of equivalence with all other instances of "children" in the story, and thus the designatum of each enters into a relationship with the others due to this paradigmatic (lexical) relation. Thus, the
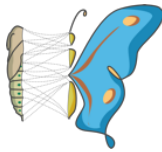
narrator's children, like the book, represent a burden for her, something she has been meaning to deal with for a very long time. That she has had the books for eighteen years (the legal age of adulthood in the United States, where the story takes place) strengthens the bond of equivalence between the children and the book *The Children*. Once eighteen years have passed she can be free of both. The title of the other book reveals again the burdensomeness of domestic life.

The House of Mirth must be read as ironical. 'Mirth' belongs to the highest register of English diction and stands out from the rest of the story, which is written in very common language. This is a case of what Lotman calls "internal recoding," which means that the code chosen by the reader for the text is suddenly shown to be insufficient. Along the syntagmatic axis, the new code activates new meanings for signs that have previously been interpreted; these signs now enter into the second system where they are valued again, though differently. Indeed as the story tells us, the household was not one of mirth, but its opposite.

One last point about the books: according to the narrator, they are "about how life in the United States changed in twenty-seven years fifty years ago" (Paley 1995: 189). The number "twenty-seven" appears in two other locations in the text, both times in reference to the number of years the narrator was married to her ex-husband (Paley 1995: 189, 190). Another paradigmatic relation is here established, between the length of time required for life in the United States to change and the length of time she was married. As before, the two elements, which are equivalent at the level of sign but not in what they refer to, enter into a relationship of equivalence and a symmetry is established between the non-equivalent parts. The meaning of the one is partly transferred to the other and vice versa. Thus, her life also changed in twenty-seven years; furthermore, this change is what *The Children* and *The House of Mirth*, which share a bond with the children themselves and the household, are "about." The condemning suggestion is that the primary role of children, what they are about, is to change the life of their mother.

The children are referenced again in the story's final scene: "The little sycamores the city had dreamily planted a couple of years before the kids were born had come that day to the prime of their lives" (Paley 1995: 190). The use of the diminutive *little* to describe the trees and the adverb *dreamily*, which is generally used to describe a lover, to describe the actions of the city are revealing of the mother's sympathies. "The kids" enter into a syntagmatic relationship with "the trees" and they are clearly valued lower. In the moment when the narrator glances out the window and notices the trees, which remind her of her children, it is not the kids, whom we must assume are also near the prime of their lives, who are remarked, but the city's *dreamily planted trees*.

The husbands also enter into the negative domain of domestic life and support our interpretation of the story's semantic structure. The first valuation of a husband begins in the third paragraph with the ex-husband's antagonising dialogue, where he is shown to be disagreeable and blameful. His appearance on stage ends with the
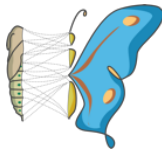
final accusation: "You'll always want nothing" (Paley 1995: 190). Following this, we get the narrator's judgment of him:

> He had had a habit throughout the twenty-seven years of making a narrow remark which, like a plumber's snake, could work its way through the ear and down the throat, halfway to my heart. He would then disappear, leaving me choking with equipment (Paley 1995: 190).
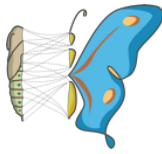
The first sentence of the quotation represents a syntax that is far more complex than any other in the story, not to mention Paley's use of a rhetorical trope, which are infrequent in *Wants*, and for this reason the sentence acquires a prominent structural position. In addition, the sentence calls into the story an external code, the language of the Old Testament, to make sense of the snake. Yet, this code must be immediately supplemented by another as we move to the following sentence, in which Eve's snake becomes "equipment" that is woven into and about the head of the narrator.

This calls to mind a more modern register, perhaps that of science fiction, where metal interwoven into the thoracic cavity carries some meaning: the wife is made non-human by her husband. In any case, the quotation represents a textual segment where numerous features overlap and for this reason contains a great number of meanings (Lotman 1977: 72). This quotation is paired with another that comes a few paragraphs later: "You couldn't exhaust either man's [ex-husband or husband's] qualities or get under the rock of his reasons in one short life" (Paley 1995: 190). This sentence is deceptive in that it reads like a compliment. However, "exhaust" means to tire out, and what we actually find beneath rocks are worms, bugs, darkness, all of which carry negative connotations in the language of literature.

We have examined the bonds of equivalence between father, children, and husbands and have shown that the whole category acquires a negative value in the story, but we are left to show the other side of the opposition and discuss how the story values community and communal duty. Here's what the narrator has to say about the librarian: "Immediately she trusted me, put my past behind her, wiped the record clean" (Paley 1995: 189). The librarian also acquires a positive value through a differential relationship with the ex-husband in the earlier sentence, "He interrupted the librarian, who had more to tell" (Paley 1995: 189). Here, the ex-husband and the librarian are in a syntagmatic relationship, and the ex-husband, shown as the aggressor, is lowered and by default the status of the librarian is lifted into the realm of the positive.

The community is also embodied, and valued positively (again, in contrast to the ex-husband), through the narrator's neighbours, who always had "sugar-cured smoked bacon" for breakfast, while she and her husband only ever had coffee (Paley 1995: 190). Critics might be persuaded to read the bacon in light of the author's Jewishness. While we can't say whether such an interpretation is valid, we do know that nowhere in the text do we learn that the narrator is Jewish, of that she is herself Grace Paley. We can, however, show that the textual structure already gives meaning to the bacon, a meaning that would remain and exist simultaneously with any other

interpretation. The ex-husband says that he remembers their breakfasts together fondly; she can't remember why until she remembers the scent of the bacon, which gave a "very grand feeling about breakfast" (Paley 1995: 190). That is to say, in isolation domestic life is unimpressive and forgettable, while even just a hint of the wider community is transformative and can bring about something grand.

The strongest positive valuation of communal duty comes just after the emotional climax of the story. The narrator, having been "extremely accused" of wanting nothing, demurs, "I want, for instance, to be a different person. I want to be the woman who brings these books back in two weeks. I want to be the effective citizen who changes the school system and addresses the Board of Estimate on the troubles of this dear urban center" (Paley 1995: 190). Earlier we said the books were bonded with the children through their titles and that both represented a burden to her. What the mother does with the books, she also does with the children. Here, the same element (children/books) is seen in a new light, and the narrator is faced with a choice. Books from a library belong to the community and borrowing entails the obligation of returning, whereas children belong to a family where the parents are responsible for them until adulthood; we see the narrator clearly siding with the former interpretation, deciding to abide by the meaning of "children" that is given by the community rather than that which is given her family. She doesn't want to keep them for eighteen years (her obligation as a parent), she wants to return them in two weeks (her obligation as a citizen). We also notice again the adjective "dear" attributed to the city. In addition, she desires to "change the school system" and "address the Board of Estimates," both actions that would benefit the broader community. In the final action of the story, the narrator observes the dreamily planted trees previously discussed, which remind her of her children, whom she immediately forgets in favour of the trees, which "had come that day to the prime of their lives."

Conclusions

The importation of linguistic principles to the study of literature has proven to be an incredibly fruitful development. In particular, the structuralist practice of construing the text as a system of signs analogous to Saussure's model of language, and analysing it as such, began a line of thinking that led to many of the major developments within literary theory in the past century. While many of these developments have consisted in a critique of structuralism, it is our contention that structural analysis has a continued utility and ought not be forgotten. It is hoped we have demonstrated this in our analysis of *Wants*. Lotman's approach in particular, with its unique understanding of the concepts 'system' and 'text,' appears to be more flexible than that of other thinkers associated with the structuralist paradigm, and it allows critics to analyse a text structurally without falling prey to criticisms of rigidity or false jurisdiction over meaning.
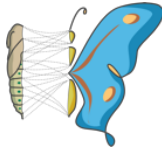
According to Lotman, the structure of a single text may come to act as a system for interpreting other texts (Lotman 1977: 22). In light of this, we have provided a structural framework that may be carried forward to further studies of Paley's fiction. The opposition of community and family and the valuation of the former over the latter is an important structural element in, at least, *The Long-Distance Runner* as well. Further research into Paley's work may show that the presence and significance of this distinction is even more widespread.

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