

## 'Pursuing' Meanings. Investigating Semantic and Pragmatic Features of some Controversial Novels

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### Abstract

*Censorship entails control, i.e. identifying and suppressing anything that does not fit political ideology or social views. In order to maintain power and control or to avoid controversy, the meanings of words are often 'pursued' by censors. This phenomenon pervades many fields, including literature, both in totalitarian societies and in the democratic ones. The present paper focuses on a double pursuit of meanings: the censoring of literary works (due to their subversive-like, satirical or 'obscene' language) and the analysis of meanings from a linguistic point of view. Special attention will be paid to the levels of semantics and pragmatics inasmuch as these are particularly important within literary discourse that used to risk (or still risks) to be deciphered and considered sin of the cerebrum.*

**Key words:** censorship, literary discourse, ideology, politics, linguistics

It is generally known that the meaning of words can have a particular impact on the addressee(s) in a communication act. The 'communication acts' under scrutiny here are literary texts that have been challenged or even banned on the grounds of their subversive or obscene subject matters and language. The questions that arise in the case of texts that had been considered controversial are: "What are the elements that make them controversial?"; "To what extent and under what temporal and spatial circumstances were they subjected to control, challenged or banned?" Therefore, in order to understand the connection between the social, religious or political contexts, or the impact of these texts and why the meanings were 'pursued' by censorial boards or institutions, it is important to start by analysing their semantic features. The analysis here is carried out from a linguistic point of view, i.e. an analysis of meanings in fictional discourses exposed to censorship, from the semantic and the pragmatic perspectives. Nevertheless, references to

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translation theories and Romanian versions are to be made inasmuch as some novels have been banned both in the authors' country of origin (i.e. English speaking countries - the U.S. or the U.K.) and in Romania. The corpus analysed includes novels written by George Orwell (*Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*), Ray Bradbury (*Fahrenheit 451*) and William Somerset Maugham (*The Painted Veil*).

The concept of censorship, in this paper, can be understood as the act of banning texts from publication. The circumstances and the criteria of censorship are different, and it seems necessary to provide an overview of the latter.

## **1. Censoring Criteria**

### **1.1. Censorship in the English speaking countries**

The types of censorship related to the subject matter of the chosen novels are the governmental and the cultural censorship (Green and Karolides, 2005: xviii), and these refer to the institutions that censor texts in order to make them fit their interests, mentality or ideology. The grounds on which cultural products are censored (social, religious and political) can all be summarized by the term injurious or, more generally, controversial. In the U.S. or the U.K. many literary works have been legally banned, but also banned in a broader sense, i.e. condemned by churches, rejected by publishing houses or removed from libraries and school curricula (Sova 2006: x). Considering the subject matter of George Orwell and Ray Bradbury's novels and the information from Green and Karolides's Encyclopaedia of Censorship, it becomes obvious that the issues tackled in these texts, which made them controversial, are as follows:

#### **1.1.1. Political issues**

Due to references to totalitarian regimes and their effects on society and individuals, the novel *Animal Farm* was banned in schools in the U.S in 1987 and in Moscow in 1977, whereas 1984, that seemed to illustrate communism in a favourable light, was challenged for being pro-communist, but then also banned in the USSR (due to excessive reference to the Soviet Union and the dictatorial regime).

#### **1.1.2. Social or moral issues**

References to censorship and the negative aspects of life (abortion, drugs, adultery and other inappropriate relationships between family members etc.) are made in *Fahrenheit 451*. The novel was banned in schools in the

U.S.A. in 1986, and in 1967 words like “abortion”, “damn” or “hell” were eliminated by the publishing house, and 75 passages were modified in the version for high schools at the same time with the ‘adult’ version. Between 1973 and 1979, only the expurgated version was published.

Maugham’s books are also on the list of most often censored books (the index of banned books in the Encyclopaedia) and on the blacklists of organizations like the National Organization for Decent Literature (Green and Karolides 2005: 260). Moreover, *The Painted Veil* was banned by the Irish Board of Censors under the Censorship Acts of 1929/1946 on obscenity grounds (Green and Karolides 2005: 296).

## 1.2. Censorship in Romania

As far as the censoring in Romania is concerned, this phenomenon (in the literary field) can be associated with the classification of library book stocks into – *“fond uzual”*– available to all readers, *“fond documentar”*– books to be consulted by professors and researchers only with approval and *“fond special”*– special or secret. Banning or censorship was carried out according to the criteria mentioned and enlarged upon in ‘brochures’ (and their corresponding Instructions) like the ones in 1946, 1948 and 1949. The secrecy was a characteristic of the latter, that was not to be made public, but kept for internal use in institutions – *“Lista publicatiilor nedifuzabile, de circulație internă”*. It was on this last brochure that all the banning (till the fall of communism) was based, with the purpose of eliminating any elements of cosmopolitanism and imperialism coming from the Occident. It is known that the phenomenon of censorship manifested itself intensely during communism and, according to the last ‘brochure’ issued, most of Somerset Maugham’s novels were included on this censoring/banning list and consequently in the ‘forbidden’ section of the libraries. In Professor Paul Caravia’s *Scieri cenzurate* more than six books by William Somerset Maugham are mentioned (2000: 334, 335). He was one of the most censored authors in communist Romania and it is worth identifying the reasons. This is possible by considering the criteria that are common to all the documents issued. They refer to the elements found in the title or the body of texts which fall in one or more of the following categories:

- English and American books translated between 1920 and 1945 (in *Instructions regarding the selection of books from the library stocks* quoted in Petcu 1999: 174);
- related to fascism, individualism, chauvinism, “rotting” occidental civilisation (Petcu 1999: 167);

- referring to religion or anti-Semitism, ideas against the communist ideology or the ideology of the working class, and which favour the concepts of exploitation, reactionary, bourgeoisie, capitalism (Costea, Kiraly, Radosav 1995: 74, 78);
- about mysticism (document about the norms of defascisation in Corobca 2011: 153) ;
- books on occultism, anti-Marxist, anti-Russian, detective-novels, adventure or pornographic novels (Costea, Kiraly, Radosav 1995: 82), i.e. novels that aim at stirring lust, that illustrate morbid or exaggerated aspects of life are forbidden and removed from libraries;
- demoralising or sentimental novels, displaying feelings like resignation or indifference (document about the defascisation norms in Corobca 2011: 153)
- “indirectly hostile” to the regime, “confusion causing” etc. (Costea, Kiraly, Radosav 1995: 40).

It can also be noticed that there were similarities between the criteria adopted by other countries and the ones of the Romanian communist regime. In communist Romania, the censoring of texts for their racial, chauvinistic, Nazi elements, similarly to the ‘fight’ against -isms in Western countries (racism, sexism, ageism etc.) mentioned by Green, are said to be only pretexts for eliminating what was not to the liking of authorities, for preserving power. In the best of the cases, the intention was to protect certain categories of people, like children or ethnic groups.

Since in the literary language, as in any other type of discourse, words or structures might directly or indirectly express ‘uncomfortable’ ideas, it is worth analysing the linguistic properties of the aforementioned texts. This presupposes an investigation into how meaningful linguistic units (that build the censorable meanings) could be interpreted by the addressees (readers). In other words, the ‘pragmatic’ stage is an understanding of the instances of uses of the semantic elements, of the ideas the authors (might have) intended to convey or infer in the texts. All this is feasible by considering the censoring criteria.

## 2. Semantic and Pragmatic Features

As Ariel puts it, semantic representations are usually “generated exclusively by combining lexical meanings according to grammatical (semantic) rules - the principle of compositionality (2010: 106) whereas

“the utterance-context relations fall under pragmatics” (2010: 100). Censorable texts can be analysed starting from pragmatic aspects to the semantic ones and the other way round, with slightly different effects. When reading a text, censors or any other ‘addressee’ can identify situations and contexts that allude to, infer or literally convey reality because literature is often mimetic. The next stage would be analysing coherent units of meaning that are used for illustrating both the fictional contexts and the extra-linguistic ones. This occurs when one looks at texts starting from pragmatics to semantics, i.e. deconstructing the linguistic code after considering the contexts in which it is used. Here, one must be aware that “the correlation between the interpretation/use and linguistic outputs is not rule governed. It is calculated by invoking our reasoning capabilities. In order to arrive at interpretations/uses, assumptions relevant in the specific context are heavily relied upon” (Ariel: 2010: 102).

If we consider the *pragmatics* -> *semantics* method, readers’ assumptions in the case of Orwell’s *Animal Farm* or *1984* depend on their knowledge of the writer’s biography, his political views or the political and social context of the country in which the text/translation circulates. When reading the preface on the freedom of the press, a preview of the reference to dictatorship in *Animal Farm* is made clear even though the characters of the story are animals: “So long as the prestige of the USSR is not involved, the principle of free speech has been reasonably well upheld” (Orwell 1996: 7); “the result of preaching totalitarian doctrines is to weaken the instinct by means of which free peoples know what is or is not dangerous (Orwell 1996: 14).

In the novel, Squealer (a pig) makes a speech in order to “explain the new arrangements” (Orwell 2013: 40) to the animals that have taken up the control of a farm after chasing the farmer. Here they are ‘being convinced’ that another pig, Napoleon, is the right leader, and not Snowball (that sparked the revolution against the human beings):

“Do not imagine, comrades, that leadership is a pleasure! On the contrary, it is a deep and heavy responsibility. No one believes more firmly than Comrade Napoleon that all animals are equal. He would be only too happy to let you make your decisions for yourselves. But sometimes you might make the wrong decisions, comrades, and then where should we be? [...] “Bravery is not enough,” said Squealer. “Loyalty and obedience are more important. [...] Discipline, comrades, iron discipline! That is the watchword for today. One false step and our enemies would be upon us (Orwell 2013: 40-41).

The name of the character has a great impact at the semantic level. The noun 'squealer' becomes a proper noun and it precedes and suggests the expected perlocutionary effect of its speech. The noun takes its suggestiveness (a person that speaks very loudly) from the meaning of the verb itself, that has a greater degree of markedness than speak and the noun speaker (that normally, without the intention of foregrounding, would have been used to refer to a spokesman). The noun squealer is marked [+animal], [+loud volume] features, whereas speaker [-animal] and [-loud volume], thus it becomes obvious (only to well informed readers) that the novella is more than an animal story, a modern fable.

The extract reveals the structure of propagandistic speech used by totalitarian subjects, but there is also an authorial voice that emphasises the locutionary act - "said Squealer". The paragraph begins with a negative imperative sentence (main clause) and, after inserting the noun that refers to the addressees of the speech - "comrades" - continues with a subordinate (relative) clause that continues the persuasion process initiated by the imperative one because, as mentioned before, it is an utterance produced by 'a pig' that tries to convince its audience of Napoleon's value. In fact, this sentence seems to encode the value of an order, of a dictated opinion. It might also be regarded as inferring what the next sentence communicates. The word "pleasure" contrasts "deep and heavy responsibility" and this is expressed by means of the pragmatic connectors "on the contrary". According to Gardiner (in Moeschler and Reboul 1999: 41), speakers do not only have the intention to communicate, but they also have an ulterior purpose, that in Squealer's case would be to indoctrinate the audience and gain respect for the leader, whose name, Napoleon, is also a historically representative one. As a signifier, one can associate this name with the concept of power by considering the personality of the French ruler and this can be, to a certain extent, regarded as metonymy. These first sentences 'pave the way' for the other persuasion elements: "He would be only too happy to let you make your decisions for yourselves. But sometimes you might make the wrong decisions, comrades, and then where should we be?" The pronoun "we" in the structure "where should we be?" as a simple element of the linguistic code encodes the speaker and other characters. Nevertheless, the cultural, political or social context provide us with the possible meanings, i.e. understanding who the speakers are and who the important others are and how they are referred to by means of satire and allegory. Therefore, "we" might stand for the speaker and the dictator

(and its acolytes) that promise to support 'the people' and make life better. The speech continues in much the same vein by displaying terms like "loyalty", "obedience" or "discipline", elements that cover the conceptual domain of totalitarianism/dictatorship. The noun "discipline" is repeatedly used in a structure also marked pragmatically by the (noun) modifier "iron (discipline)" that emphasises the idea of total obedience and not necessarily the one of accuracy, correctness and 'healthy' rule obeying. The type of semantic shift in the case of this term could be looked at as pejoration, inasmuch as dictators ask obedience and not the control of behaviour for personal or social purposes. The deictic (demonstrative pronoun) "this" points at the word "discipline" and it links the term "watchword" to this previously analysed noun. The definition of the term "watchword" - "a word or phrase that expresses an attitude or a belief" (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English) is another element that makes one think of ideological manipulation. Therefore, the word itself, as all the words and structures that refer to dictatorship and totalitarian means and ways, is intentionally used by the journalist writer Orwell.

By directing attention and the analysis from the linguistic elements and their meaning to the encoded information, one could get to the conclusion that the process of interpreting the literary text in the fictional or socio-political context could start by firstly investigating into the linguistic structures (semantic elements) - the forms and meanings, but also into how the linguistic code is being used and the pragmatic aspects present in the texts. Either way, we are here interested in identifying and analysing both the logic form (Moeschler and Reboul 1999: 21) and the ideas expressed or inferred, but also discussing meaning in relation to fictional or real context and vice versa.

Controversial structures occur in discourse, not just in isolated sentences. It is therefore important to know both the fictional (discourse) and the censorship context. Therefore, they are revealed in excerpts like the following, from *1984*, by analysing the "rudimentary meanings" provided through the linguistic code and by also considering the extent to which it is enriched through inferring or other pragmatic procedures (Ariel 2010: 101-102):

'Comrades!' cried an eager youthful voice. 'Attention, comrades! We have glorious news for you. We have won the battle for production! Returns now completed of the output of all classes of consumption!

goods show that the standard of living has risen by no less than 20 per cent over the past year. All over Oceania this morning there were irrepressible spontaneous demonstrations when workers marched out of factories and offices and paraded through the streets with banners voicing their gratitude to Big Brother for the new, happy life which his wise leadership has bestowed upon us. Here are some of the completed figures. Foodstuffs----' (Orwell 1996: 45).

When reading this piece of text exclusively, the linguistically encoded information reveals again a speech made by an acolyte of a leader called Big Brother. The 'circularity' of the speech is illustrated by the way it is structured from the persuasion point of view. It starts with a call for attention "Comrades", "Attention, comrades!" and an appraising NP, "glorious news" (where the modifier "glorious" intensifies the rhetorical effect), followed by sentences that contain semantic elements paradigmatically connected, i.e. presentation of facts about material goods: "production", "returns", "consumption goods", "standard of living (has risen)" where percentages or figures come to emphasise the concept of a real 'market research'. Moreover, before getting again to facts and figures, the speech continues with the following structure that is meant to appraise again the achievements under the great leader: "there were irrepressible spontaneous demonstrations when workers marched out of factories and offices and paraded through the streets ... his leadership has bestowed upon us" (Orwell 1996: 45).

The deictic pronoun "(upon) us" encodes the speaker and the others that are 'affected' by a certain situation. It follows a chain of sentences whose protagonists are the others - "workers", "their"- but, when used with the verb "bestow" and the preposition "upon", it becomes obvious that it infers the gratitude of the speaker and the others towards the "wise" leader. Consequently, by analysing this excerpt starting from the linguistic elements, censorship becomes justified inasmuch as the excerpt and the whole novel depicts a dictatorial society for either criticising or promoting the ideology.

The subject matter and censoring reasons linked to the novel *Fahrenheit 451* could also become obvious by considering the semantic elements in a first instance. The process of explicature is as important as for any of the texts under scrutiny here. The meanings pursued by the ones who censored this novel could be synthesised in the following paragraphs, marked by pragmatically effective techniques:



Go home and think of your first husband divorced and your second husband killed in a jet and your third husband blowing his brains out, go home and think of the dozen abortions you've had, go home and think of that and your damn caesarean sections, too, and your children who hate your guts! Go home and think how it all happened and what did you ever do to stop it? (Bradbury 2008: 79)

Regarded as an independent piece of text and without being aware of the subject matter and the cultural contexts, from the semantic point of view the excerpt provides many instances that made it censorable and challenged in schools and institutions. The chain of imperatives that begin with the same structure "go home and think" suggests that the paragraph is made up of utterances (given by a character) directed to another character, whose morality is doubtful. This is illustrated by the concepts placed after the imperatives that require meditation on human actions and flaws: divorce, abortions, children who hate parents, caesarean sections (instead of normal birth giving), suicide, pessimism and death. As mentioned above, the text was mostly censored due to the presence of this kind of concepts like abortions, drugs (pills) and other immoral issues, that the excerpt abounds in. Addressees of the message sent by the addresser (the author) can perceive the message (and the whole novel) in two different ways, depending on the knowledge of the subject matter, author's style and novel typology.

First, one can look at the story itself and consider only the literal meanings and for censors it could become an easy prey. In this case, explicature, i.e. the "basic interpretation of an utterance, using contextual information and world knowledge to work out what is being referred to" is useful. (Griffiths 2006: 6)

For instance, by employing informal expressions like "hate your guts" as a feeling attributed to children, the concept of hate is amplified and from the pragmatic point of view one might presume that the addresser knows well the context in which and the purpose for which he produces the utterances directed to the addressee. Moreover, the following enumeration whose elements are all linked by the conjunction "and" without other orthographic symbol used for coordinating "your first husband divorced and your second husband killed [...] and your third husband blowing his brains out" seems to highly point at pessimism and immorality.

In Maugham's *The Painted Veil*, elements related to adultery, mysticism, spirituality, religion etc. are to be found. For instance, by

simply scanning the excerpt below, structures referring to mysticism and religion are the first that get the attention of readers investigating controversial structures:

'I'm looking for something and I don't know what it is. But I know that it's very important for me to know it, and if I did it would make all the difference. Perhaps the nuns know it; when I'm with them I feel that they hold a secret which they will not share with me. [...] Do you know it?' He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. 'Tao. Some of us look for the Way in opium and some in God, some of us in whisky and some in love. It is all the same Way and it leads nowither' (Maugham 2007: 299).

The words "nuns" and "God" belong to the semantic field of religion. Moreover, the characters (nuns) seem to know something "very important" and that the other character defines by using elements related to philosophy, religion, mysticism, or human vice ("opium" and "whisky"). In the 1943 translation (by Jul Giurgea), the equivalence is both semantic and pragmatic in particular in the lines referring to mysticism and to the quest for the concept that could change lives. Nevertheless, the translation goes beyond the S.T. logical form and introduces the philosophical concept of truth - "adevăr"- (previously defined as "secret"), that in the original is often called "it", but that is inferred by the structures that point at the great importance of the concept or thing- "that would make the difference" and is "very important". There is also an addition in the T.T., meant to increase the aura of mystery "*Acesta este marele mister*". The concept of truth and all the above mentioned could be among the ones that made the novel censorable in totalitarian Romania.

- *Caut ceva, fără să știu anume ce este, dar presimt covârșitoarea importanță a acestui lucru necunoscut. Bănuiesc că întreaga mea viață ar putea să se transforme; probabil călugărițele cunosc și ele acest secret, căci alături de ele îmi dau seama că trebuie să fie în posesia lui, dar nu mi-l vor împărtăși niciodată [...] Dumnezeu îl cunoști?*

*Waddington zâmbi și ridică din umeri.*

- *Tao... Adevărul! Acesta este marele mister. Unii dintre oameni îl caută în opiu, alții în Dumnezeu, unii dintre noi în whisky, alții în dragoste; dar este același lucru, și toată frământarea aceasta nu duce nicăieri* (Maugham 1943: 239).

In the 1972 target version (by Radu Lupan), controversial concepts are translated as follows: opium as "uitare" (forgetfulness), that on a

paradigmatic axis can function only if interpreted by using the background knowledge about the effects of the substance, and God as “credință” (faith). The word “Tao” is omitted and this part of the extract is introduced by the hesitation “Cum să-ți spun”, a procedure that diminishes the mysticism and possibly the effect on the audience and does not point at the concept of truth like the previous version: “- Cum să-ți spun, unii dintre noi își caută calea în uitare, alții în credință, unii dintre noi în whisky iar alții în dragoste. Dar nici una din aceste căi nu duce nicăieri” (Maugham 1972: 137). This translation could be regarded as an instance of self-censorship, this time practiced by the translator and not by the writer.

As it has been argued in the present analysis, all of the novels have been subject to censorship, according to different criteria. The semantic and pragmatic elements might be the most relevant for a readership whose purpose is censoring, but also for other types of addressees. In addition, in some of the novels in question, the purpose and the subject matter are mentioned in essays or prefaces and therefore both the addresser and addressee “apply their inferential abilities to the premises available from the content of the utterance and relevant contextual assumptions” (Ariel 2010: 100). Therefore, one can draw the conclusion that, as Ariel puts it, the result of an analysis of this type is “a context-bound interpretation/use of language tokens, but the relations between forms and their functions are [...] mediated by contextual assumptions and plausible inferences based on them” (Ariel 2010: 102).

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