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# “BECKY SAID” – “CRIED AMELIA” A METAPHONOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF SPEECHES IN *VANITY FAIR*

ELISA BOLCHI

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**Abstract:** *The paper analyses the representation of women from a relatively unexplored point of view: that of metaphonology, namely how direct speech is introduced or described by the narrator, as it is actually interesting to see how women’s speech was rendered in an era when their silence was most cherished. Thackeray’s “Vanity Fair” offers good material to work on, as it presents two different kinds of woman: the submissive ‘womanly woman’, Amelia, and the outgoing ‘new woman’, Rebecca. I aim to discuss how female characters’ speech acts help to elucidate their role in the novel and their attitude towards society.*

**Keywords:** *Metaphonological language, reported speech, Thackeray, Vanity Fair*

## 1. Introduction

*Vanity Fair* is, according to its title, *A Novel without a Hero*. Several characters indeed act in the show staged by W.M. Thackeray, whose intent was not telling the story of a single man or woman, as it was common in the Victorian age, when “by far the larger number of novels dealt with the constantly increasing mass of individuals who made up, or aspired to make up, the middle class” (Dennis 2000:7). On the contrary, “the artistic motive-force of *Vanity Fair* is Thackeray’s vision of bourgeois society and of personal relationships engendered by that society” (Dennis 2000:97). Thackeray declaredly acts like a puppeteer, opening his novel with a chapter titled *Before the Curtain*, and closing it with an invitation to “shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out” (Thackeray 2003:809). Throughout the novel, he talks to his reader in order to present his characters similarly to a storyteller, aware that he is not speaking to children, but rather to the same society that he is describing – a society that lived in “an age in which ‘realism’ in art was valued above everything else” (Dennis 2000:57).

The question whether the Victorian novel might be considered a realist novel or not has been widely discussed and this is not the place for such a debate.

According to an article that appeared in the *Quarterly Review* in 1865, Thackeray was recognised, like Trollope, as the “very embodiment of the realistic school:

‘Mr. Thackeray looks at life under its ordinary aspects, and copies it with a fidelity and artistic skill which is surprising. Men, women, and children talk, act, and think in his pages exactly as they are talking acting, and thinking at every hour of the day’. (Dennis 2000:59)

Consequently, I aim to analyse the two principal female characters of the novel through their dialogues, and more precisely, through the ways in which Thackeray introduces their speech.

## 2. Metaphonological language in discourse analysis

In her *Framing in Discourse*, Deborah Tannen (1993:4) points out that “in the mid-80s [...] the field of linguistics was experiencing a rise of interest in discourse analysis”. More precisely,

... from the 1970s to the 1990s, there was also a small amount of work on the language of Victorian fiction more generally [...]. Emphasis was placed on the representation of speech which, in the 1990s, overlapped with the interest of language historians in pronunciation and class. (O’Gorman 2002:196).

In the wake of these interests, Sergio Cigada began to research what he defines as *metaphonological language*, the “language referring to the phonological component of language” (Cigada 1989:26). This interest in the metaphonological component of reported speech is not accidental. Until the second half of the twentieth century, “no one had ever thought of combining the notion of intonation with that of discourse” (Couper-Kuhlen 2001:14). This was because the Saussurian school privileged the study of *langue*, seen as a language system, over the study of *parole*, seen as language performance, which relegated discourse to the borders of linguistic analysis. In 1975, however, Jenny Simonin-Grumbach (1979) was already stressing how, thanks to the work of Benveniste (1966), who showed the necessity to make the description of discursive practices a part of language studies, the need for a new approach was felt. Her vision was that of a *linguistics of discourse*, which could go beyond Saussurian structural linguistics. Even M.M. Bakhtin (1981:279), in his essay *Discourse in the Novel*, stressed how dialogue was studied “merely as a compositional form in the structuring of speech” where “the internal dialogism of the word [...], the dialogism that penetrates its entire structure, all its semantic and expressive layers, is almost entirely ignored”, although it was precisely this internal dialogism to have “such enormous power to shape style”. By the 1980s, “it was beginning to be apparent to some linguists that there might be a discourse function of intonation which would merit investigation” (Couper-Kuhlen 2001:14). Cigada was among those linguists and, as Couper-Kuhlen (2001:14) states that “few if any linguists today would wish to deny the fact that intonation impacts with language”, I decided to start from Cigada’s work and focus my research on those metaphonological aspects of speech in literature, since “speech event analysis has played an important role in calling attention both to the importance of context in talk and to discourse as the principal site for language and culture studies” (Gumperz 2001:215). As Bakhtin writes:

the words of the author that represent and frame another’s speech create a perspective for it; they separate light from shadow, create the situation and conditions necessary for it to sound; finally, they penetrate into the interior of the other’s speech, carrying into it their own accents and their own expressions, creating for it a dialogizing background. (Bakhtin 1981:358)

This is exactly what metaphonological studies focus on, as they examine the “descriptive component of the intonation of characters’ locutionary acts” (Cigada 1989:25), i.e. they analyse how direct speech is introduced, or described, by the narrator. According to Jakobson, “forms for reporting speech such as verbs of speaking (‘say’, ‘tell’...) and quotatives are among the most important metalinguistic forms used to describe or report individual utterances” (Lucy 1993: 94). Cigada (1989) divides these introductory forms into four categories: the *zero*

*degree*, when the dialogues are presented without any introduction, like in a theatre pièce; the *unmarked reporting verbs*, such as *say, answer, affirm, continue*, that do not introduce descriptive variants. Among these speech verbs, *say* is, of course, the most neutral or “semantically unmarked” (Lucy 1993:96), characterizing the reported utterance the least and not asserting anything specific about the communication. The *marked reporting verbs* are, on the contrary, those verbs implying the semantic trait of *say* and adding a description of how things are said, with a reference to intonation, such as *murmur, shout, exclaim*. Eventually, Cigada describes the *metaphonological forms*: periphrastic descriptions of the suprasegmental traits that usually rest on an unmarked speaking verb. Examples are forms like “she said with a voice broken by tears” or “she said laughing”.

### 3. Speech in the Victorian novel

This metaphonological aspect of speech is much more interesting in the so-called realistic novels, meaning those novels aiming at a mimesis of the experienced world, at a representation as faithful as possible of reality. As a result of that aim, writers could not reduce their characters’ locutionary acts to mere pronunciation characteristics; they had to pay attention also to the suprasegmental component of speech, namely to intonation, by resorting to a semantic description of the tone. This doubling of the locutionary act (segmental and suprasegmental; the latter representing the description of intonation as further semantic communication), is what *metaphonological language* designates (Cigada 1989).

Although Cigada thinks that a metaphonological analysis is much more interesting in the realist novel of the nineteenth century, because authors were not aware of the phenomenon and therefore it is represented without filters of critical reflection, in a sort of spontaneous writing (Cigada 1989:26), Levine (1981:7) affirms that

...the great novelists of the nineteenth century were never so naïve about narrative conventions or the problems of representation as later realists or modern critics have suggested.

As a matter of fact,

No major Victorian novelists were deluded into believing that they were in fact offering an unmediated reality; but all of them struggled to make contact with the world out there, and, even with their knowledge of their own subjectivity, to break from the threatening limits of solipsism, of convention, and of language. (Levine 1981:8).

That may be why I believe Victorian novelists’ use of narrative conventions is worth exploring, specifically those conventions which serve to report speech in a novel like *Vanity Fair*, aimed at portraying society as a whole and therefore laying a particular emphasis on some characters emblematic of the Victorian values on which that society was based: the Womanly Woman - Amelia and the Self-made New Woman - Rebecca.

### 4. How characters speak in *Vanity Fair*

The novel opens at Miss Pinkerton’s academy, where young Rebecca Sharp has worked as a French teacher for some years and young Amelia Sedley has just

completed her education. The time to leave the college has come for the two girls who are about to enter the world, the Society, the Vanity Fair. The first character to speak is Miss Jemima, Miss Pinkerton's sister and assistant, who is preparing for Amelia a copy of Johnson's Dictionary – which Miss Pinkerton “invariably presented to her scholars on their departure from the Mall” (2003:9). After a short dialogue between the two women, the first periphrastic metaphonological expression appears: Miss Pinkerton asks Miss Jemima, “with awful coldness” (2003:9), for whom the extra copy of the Dictionary she is holding in her hand is. Miss Jemima answers it is for Becky Sharp, thus pronouncing Rebecca's name for the first time in the novel, and she does it “trembling very much and blushing over her withered face and neck” (2003:9). When she hears Miss Sharp's name, Miss Pinkerton is startled: “‘MISS JEMIMA!’ exclaimed Miss Pinkerton in the largest capitals” (2003:9). This is the first marked quotative to appear in the novel, showing an alteration of self-control in Miss Pinkerton, who had been introduced as cold, severe and restrained, and stressing her amazement at the idea to give a copy of the Dictionary to Miss Sharp. The metaphonologically marked quotative *exclaimed* is also followed by the metafictional reference “in the largest capitals”, the first of Thackeray's many winks at his reader with whom he dialogues along the novel about the narrative tools he uses to tell his story.

Although she has already been introduced to the reader, Rebecca first speaks a few pages after the beginning of the novel, replying to Miss Jemima's request to go and say goodbye to Miss Pinkerton: “‘I suppose I must’, said Miss Sharp calmly” (2003:12). The first sentence Rebecca pronounces shows that, for her, duty is something to be interpreted by her own judgement. Thackeray uses an unmarked quotative, and by adding the metaphonological adverb *calmly*, he introduces Becky to the reader by the social image she will keep during the whole novel: calm, controlled, never showing her true emotions. Rebecca's next words are introduced by a periphrastic metaphonological expression:

Miss Sharp advanced in a very unconcerned manner, and said in French, and with a perfect accent, ‘Mademoiselle, je viens vous faire mes adieux.’ (2003:13)

Rebecca's perfect French accent is one of her distinguishing features in the novel and Thackeray introduces her in this way so that the readers may figure it out that Becky was a competent and refined woman. Miss Pinkerton, on the contrary,

did not understand French; she only directed those who did; but biting her lips and throwing up her venerable and Roman-nosed head (on top of which figured a large solemn turban), she said, ‘Miss Sharp, I wish you a good-morning’. As the Hammersmith Semiramis spoke she waved one hand, both by way of adieu, and to give Miss Sharp an opportunity of shaking one of the fingers of the hand which was left out for that purpose. (2003:13)

Thackeray prefers to use periphrastic description instead of marked quotatives, thus portraying very clearly not only the way in which his characters speak but also their psychological traits. Miss Pinkerton shows her austerity “by biting her lips and throwing up her venerable and Roman-nosed head” before speaking, but it is only an affected authority, as she actually does not understand those she directs.

The first chapter closes with Miss Jemima *crying* “Stop!” to the two leaving girls, to give Becky a copy of the Dictionary as she thought “poor Becky will be

miserable if she don't get one" (2003:9). But as soon as the coach drives off, Becky throws the book back into the college garden, and Miss Jemima is unable to finish her comment:

'Well, I never' – said she – 'what an audacious' – Emotion prevented her from completing either sentence. (2003:14)

From the beginning of the novel, then, Thackeray presents Becky as a character causing extreme reactions in others. She has not entered the scene yet and other characters are already *trembling* and *blushing* because of her, or they are so overwhelmed by emotions caused by her as to become unable to utter a complete sentence, like in the last example. This pattern will persist throughout the novel, where Thackeray mainly uses unmarked quotatives, such as *said*, *answered*, *replied*, to introduce Rebecca's controlled speech, while marked quotatives are reserved for the uncontrolled utterances of her interlocutors.

To better understand how reporting verbs are used for the two heroines of this "novel without a hero", let us start by considering the most used unmarked quotative: *say*. The verb is used around a thousand times in the novel, 25 per cent of which for Rebecca and Amelia. Rebecca's speech is introduced (or followed) by the quotative *say* almost twice as often as Amelia's. This same trend is followed by other verbs: the unmarked *reply*, *answer*, *continue*, but also marked declarative verbs, which are the main interest of this investigation, such as *whisper*, *exclaim* or *gasp*.

The marked declarative verb *cry* plays a completely different role. It occurs 121 times and, following the general trend of the unmarked quotative *say*, one quarter of the times it is used to introduce Rebecca's and Amelia's speech. However, its frequency is higher when introducing Amelia's speech: it occurs 20 times for Amelia and only 13 times for Rebecca, therefore we have here a complete inversion of the trend that sees Rebecca speaking twice as much as Amelia.

*Cry* is also a special verb, as it has more than one meaning. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, when used to introduce direct speech, "to cry" means "to say something loudly in an excited or anguished tone of voice". Consequently, it is worth analyzing how and when the quotative *cry* occurs for Amelia and Becky, when it is used to refer to an *excited tone* and when to that of *anguished tone*, and trying to understand how it helps to delineate the character of the two heroines. An analysis of the metaphonologically marked reporting verb *cry* will clearly reveal how self-confident and manipulative Rebecca Sharp is.

Let us start by examining how *cry* is used after the two girls leave Miss Pinkerton's college and are in the carriage heading for Amelia's house. Amelia is the first to *cry out* in the novel, but she does it as a reaction to Rebecca's outburst of rage:

'I hate the whole house', continued Miss Sharp in a fury. 'I hope I may never set eyes on it again. I wish it were in the bottom of the Thames, I do; and if Miss Pinkerton were there, I wouldn't pick her out, that I wouldn't. O, how I should like to see her floating in the water yonder, turban and all, with her train streaming after her, and her nose like the beak of a wherry.'

'Hush!' cried Miss Sedley.

'Why, will the black footman tell tales?' cried Miss Rebecca, laughing. (2003:16)

Rebecca responds to Amelia by ‘crying’ in return, but with a completely different attitude. She is not crying “in an anguished tone”, denoting worry, like Amelia, but “in an excited tone”, because she is laughing at Amelia’s reaction.

The same happens a few moments later, when Becky Sharp, with great enthusiasm, shouts: “Vive la France! Vive l’Empereur! Vive Bonaparte!” and once again Amelia cries in order to stop her friend: “‘O Rebecca, Rebecca, for shame!’ cried Miss Sedley” (2003:16).

The quotative *cry* used for Amelia Sedley is almost always intended to refer to an anguished tone, and of its twenty occurrences, it is only twice accompanied by a metaphonological periphrasis, both times in order to underline her anguish:

‘Ghent! Brussels!’ cried out Amelia *with a sudden shock and start*. (2003:281)

‘Never speak of that day again’, Emmy cried out, so *contrite and humble*, that William turned off the conversation. (2003:805).

In other cases when *cry* is used, the proper name *Amelia* is modified by the adjective *poor*, as in “cried *poor* Amelia in reply” (2003:542), stressing the idea of the “weak-girl”, victim of events. In the case of Rebecca, on the other hand, the verb *cry* is inserted in a metaphonological periphrasis four times out of the thirteen total occurrences, two of which to emphasize Becky’s excited and gay tone, as in “cried Rebecca *laughing*” (2003:16) and “cried little Rebecca *in an ecstasy*” (2003:323).

There are many examples throughout the novel, and it is impossible to analyse them all here, but the use of *cry* for the two characters is more or less the same in the entire novel: Amelia mostly cries with complete sincerity and transport, while Becky typically cries to show excitement or to draw attention to herself; Becky always proves to be in complete control of herself.

Becky being such a controlled woman, it might be interesting to see what happens when she is taken by surprise. This first happens in chapter 3, where Joseph Sedley is introduced. Amelia’s brother is a rich man and that is why Rebecca plans to seduce him and make him marry her, despite the fact that he is a “very stout, puffy man” (2003:25). Her plans are evident from her reaction on first seeing him: “‘He’s very handsome’, *whispered* Rebecca to Amelia, *rather loud*” (2003:25).

Becky *whispers*, but her purpose is to be heard, and by using this metaphonological description, Thackeray tells the reader that her seduction stratagem has started. Rebecca carries on her seduction plans at dinner as well, when she tries some curry and, asked by Mr. Sedley if she finds it as good as everything else from India, she tries to control herself and answers “Oh excellent!” even though, Thackeray adds, she was “suffering tortures with the cayenne pepper” (2003:31). Jos then offers her a chili:

‘A chili’, *said* Rebecca, *gasping*. ‘Oh yes!’ She thought a chili was something cool. (2003:31)

But once she tastes it, self-control becomes impossible, as “flesh and blood could bear it no longer”, so she lays down her fork and:

‘Water, for Heaven’s sake, water!’ she *cried*. (2003:31).

In this scene, Thackeray first uses an unmarked quotative followed by a description of Rebecca’s inner state, then an unmarked verb followed by a marked one; notice that he did not write “*gasped* Rebecca”, but “*said* Rebecca *gasping*”, to

emphasize the fact that, although suffocating, she tries to keep her temper and is still able to speak. But when the chili makes her lose control, she eventually *cries* out for water. She however “swallows” her mortification and “as soon as she could speak, said, with a comical, good-humoured air – ‘I ought to have remembered the pepper which the Princess of Persia puts in the cream-tarts in the *Arabian Nights*’” (2003:31), gaining the admiration of Mr. Sedley, who laughs and thinks Becky is a good-humoured girl. Rebecca is then back in command of herself and able to carry on her seduction plans.

Another scene in the novel that puts Rebecca’s self-control to the test is the *coup de théâtre* in chapter 14, when Sir Pitt Crawley proposes to her. When she understands that Sir Pitt’s request to come back to his house is, as a matter of fact, a proposal, she is astonished: “‘Come – as what, sir?’ Rebecca *gasped out*” (2003:164). If, in the chili scene, Thackeray used an unmarked verb followed by *gasped* to describe Rebecca’s speech, here he uses the marked quotative *gasped out* to emphasize her surprise. Nevertheless, she soon takes control of herself again and her answer is presented with an unmarked quotative: “‘O Sir Pitt!’ Rebecca *said, very much moved*” (2003:164). Her demeanour on this occasion is described with the help of adjectives and periphrasis and not of marked reporting verbs. It is Sir Pitt who *cries out* when Rebecca tells him she is already married: “‘Married; you’re joking,’ the Baronet *cried*” (2003:165), while she answers:

‘Married! Married!’ Rebecca *said, in an agony* of tears – her voice *choking with emotion*, her handkerchief up to her ready eyes, fainting against the mantelpiece – a *figure of woe fit to melt the most obdurate heart*. (2003:165)

It is interesting to note how the unmarked *said* contrasts with the description of her reaction: the “agony of tears”, the “voice choking with emotion”, a “figure of woe fit to melt the most obdurate heart”. Everything is planned to cause pity, and Rebecca even asks Sir Pitt to consider her as his daughter, as she cannot be his wife, “Saying which, Rebecca went down on her knees in a most tragical way” (2003:166). Once again the quotative is the unmarked *say* although the scene is a most dramatic one.

While Rebecca is still on her knees, other characters enter the room and the first to speak is Miss Crawley, whose speech Thackeray renders with the help of the unmarked verb *say*, followed by a metaphonological periphrasis showing her rebuke:

‘It is the lady on the ground, and not the gentleman,’ Miss Crawley *said, with a look and voice of great scorn*. (2003:166)

Rebecca explains the situation “with a sad, tearful voice”, but it will be Miss Crawley, and not Rebecca, who needs a marked reporting verb to show her surprise: “‘Who’s have thought what?’ *cries* Miss Crawley, stamping with her foot” (2003:167). Miss Crawley alters her pitch and behavior, stamping her feet like a spoiled child, while Becky, as usual, manages the situation very well.

## 5. Conclusion

In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray presents scenes and characters like in a theatrical play, what emerges from a general analysis of metaphonological language is an extreme essentiality. The expressions are very simple and inserted in plain declarative contexts to make the dialogues more direct and immediate. One of the

reasons for this, as noticed by Mario Praz (1967), is that Thackeray prefers a psychological description to the mere description of emotions, hence stressing the gestures that accompany the speech act and the character's feelings while producing it, the tone of voice.

What I hope to have shown here is how the reporting verbs used by Thackeray help to better outline the characters' nature and behaviour. By analysing the use of the metaphonologically marked and unmarked reporting verbs, a second puppeteer comes to light: Rebecca Sharp. Her utterances are controlled and are nearly always the result of her own plot to manipulate others. In this way, the other characters alter their utterances, using higher pitches and showing distress mainly because of her, or because of her actions, or simply when talking about her. By stylistically describing his characters' speeches, Thackeray creates a rhetorical strategy which better allows the reader to figure Rebecca out not only as the female version of the typical Victorian self-made man, but also as a plotter who, in order to climb the social ladder, manipulates those around her by altering their balance and control.

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