The aesthetic paradox in processing fictional vs. non-fictional texts

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Reading Mediated Minds: Empathy with Persons and Characters in Media and Art Works

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Theoretical background

• The aesthetic paradox (Wimmer et al., submitted; Christmann et al., submitted)
  – Aesthetic objects are related to positive experiences
  – The processing of aesthetic objects demands effort
  – Cognitive load during information processing leads to negative results
    → Tension between the appreciation of aesthetic objects and their strenuous processing
    → Solution: When adopting an aesthetic attitude, cognitive load is even appreciated
Research question

What effect has the adopted reception attitude on text Processing criteria?

– Hypothesis: Depending on the reception attitude (aesthetic vs. factual), different criteria for successful text processing are applied by recipients
  • Factual attitude: demand of precise and unambiguous comprising of information
  • Aesthetic attitude: claiming deep comprehension, processing on several dimensions
Methods

- Data collection: semi-standardized interview, corresponding field manual
- Data analysis: content analysis drawing on a set of categories for processing criteria
  - Main categories consisted of levels of evaluation (example: evaluation of textual quality)
  - Sub-categories indicated genre-specific occurrence of each main category (example: evaluation of language level vs. logical structure)
Preliminary studies

• Study 1
  – Activation of reception attitude:
    Addressing of typical genre-related text features

    Material: two text excerpts, one of them fictional (Böldl: Studie in Kristallbildung [Study on Crystallization]), one non-fictional (Peroni: Die magische Grenze [The Magic Frontier])

  – Procedure
    • Read the text
    • Interview (incl. activation of reception attitude)
Preliminary studies

• Study 1
  – Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recep-</th>
<th>Processing criteria</th>
<th>Non-fictional</th>
<th>Fictional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>tion attitude</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factual</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetic</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi\(^2\) = .206; df = 1; n.s.

In both conditions fictional criteria more frequent than non-fictional ones!
Explanation: Activation of reception attitude failed
Preliminary studies

• Study 2
  → 3 different methods to induce a factual vs. aesthetic attitude
    – Staff member of public library
    – Review of the text
    – Booth operator at a flea market
  → treatment check

Material: two text excerpts, one of them fictional (MacLean: Ice Station Zebra), one non-fictional (Krakauer: Into Thin Air)
Preliminary studies

• Study 2
  – Procedure
    • Induce reception attitude
    • Read the text
    • Treatment check
  – Results
    • Most effective method of induction: review of the text
    • Independent from method of induction: aesthetic variant more successful than factual variant
    • Explanation: non-fiction review too inexplicit → modification of review
Preliminary studies

• Study 2
  – Results for modified **non-fiction recension**:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fictional text</th>
<th>Non-fictional text</th>
<th>Sum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not successful</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successful</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sum</strong></td>
<td><strong>7</strong></td>
<td><strong>9</strong></td>
<td><strong>16</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

→ Independent of text condition, participants were not convinced of the text being non-fictional!
Role of empathy

• Explanation:
  – Narrative text structure (→ text structure is critical)
  → i.e. there is a narrator the reader can identify with
  – Empathy in the sense of Davis’ (1980) fantasy scale:
    Tendency to imaginatively transpose oneself into fictional situations ("When I am reading an interesting story or novel, I imagine how I would feel if the events in the story were happening to me")
Role of empathy

• Resulting hypothesis:

Neither the reception attitude nor the text genre account for the aesthetic paradox, but the possibility to identify oneself with a narrator

– Prove required: presence of narrator facilitates text comprehension compared to texts without narrator
Main study

• Material
  – Both narrative texts from the previous study
  – Two non-narrative text excerpts, one of them fictional (Schätzing: The Swarm), one non-fictional (German Wikipedia article on Tsunamis)

• Procedure
  – Read the text
  – Write summary
  – Semi-standardized interview → reception attitude, processing criteria
Results

- Text structure $\rightarrow$ reception attitude

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Narrative structure</th>
<th>Non-narrative structure</th>
<th>Sum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factual attitude</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetic attitude</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$\text{Chi}^2 = 46.316; \text{df} = 1; \ p = .000$

$\rightarrow$ Highly significant effect of narrativity on reception attitude
Sum up and Discussion

• Conclusion
  – Narrative Texts are considered as typical fictional texts
  – Narrativity implies possible identifications with narrator
  – Hypothesis: Empathy as measured by the Fantasy Scale functions as intervening variable between textual features and processing

• Further Steps
  – Collection of empathy during reading narrative vs. non-narrative texts
  – Checking the possible role of other textual factors
Thank you very much for your attention!