BG Pulse Journal USA
ISSN:1947-2536 http://www.bgpulseusa.com/index.php/bg

THE LINGUISTIC FORMATION AND VERBALIZATION OF CHARACTERS' PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA IN CONTEMPORARY LITERARY WORKS: A CASE STUDY OF MARKUS ZUSAK'S THE BOOK THIEF

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Doi: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24133985

Abstract: This article asks how psychological trauma is built out of language in Markus Zusak's The Book Thief (2005), rather than merely depicted by it. Drawing on literary trauma theory [1; 2; 3] and on stylistic and narratological approaches [4; 5], the study reads selected episodes involving Liesel Meminger and Max Vandenburg, together with the narrating voice of Death, at three levels: the lexical-semantic, the stylistic-syntactic, and the discourse-narrative. The analysis suggests that trauma in the novel is rarely named outright. It surfaces through displaced vocabulary, recurring images, interrupted syntax, retrospective memory, and a narrator whose irony both shelters and exposes the reader. Liesel's trauma is voiced mainly through an acquisition of language, as she moves from illiteracy to authorship, while Max's is voiced through confinement, guilt, and the transformation of his own writing into a space of resistance. Death, finally, acts as a mediating witness who frames individual suffering within a historical horizon. The article argues that language in the novel is double-edged: it carries the propaganda that produces suffering, and it carries the testimony that survives it. No clinical diagnosis of fictional characters is attempted; the focus is on textual construction.

Keywords: psychological trauma, verbalization, literary discourse, traumatic memory, interior monologue, metaphor, narrator, Markus Zusak, The Book Thief.

INTRODUCTION

Literature has long been one of the places where people try to make sense of inner states that ordinary speech handles poorly. A character is never only a participant in events. Readers come to know a character through hesitations, preoccupations, and the things left unsaid. When the events in question involve war, bereavement, persecution, or forced separation, the language that carries them tends to bend under the weight, and it is precisely this bending that makes such texts interesting to linguists.

Psychological trauma, in the sense used here, refers to the lasting effects of an overwhelming experience on memory, perception, emotion, and the capacity to communicate [6]. Clinical writing has long observed that traumatic memories are often fragmentary and resist ordinary narrative ordering [6]. Literary scholars have taken up this insight and asked how fiction might reproduce, or at least gesture toward, such disrupted experience [1; 2]. The question this article pursues is a more specific one: which linguistic resources does a novel actually use to do so, and what do those resources accomplish?

The Book Thief is a productive test case. Zusak's novel [7] follows a young girl, Liesel Meminger, who is sent to foster parents in a working-class town near Munich in the early years of the Second World War. She loses her younger brother on the journey, is separated from her mother, and slowly builds a new life around books, a foster father who teaches her to read, and a Jewish man, Max Vandenburg, who is hidden in the family's basement. The whole story is narrated by Death. This combination of a child protagonist, a persecuted adult, and an unusual narrator allows trauma to be examined from three distinct linguistic positions within a single text.

Previous research on the novel has concentrated on theme and memory. Buráková [8] asks whose trauma the novel actually represents and shows that it extends beyond victims to include the complicity and suffering of ordinary Germans. Domínguez-Rué [9] reads the book as a confrontation with silenced memory in which words become instruments of witness. Both studies are valuable, yet neither sets out to describe, in systematic linguistic terms, how the text produces its traumatic effects. The present article tries to fill that gap. It treats trauma not as a topic the text reports on but as an effect the text constructs and transmits to the reader.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Trauma, memory, and narrative

Caruth's [1] influential account holds that trauma is not fully registered at the moment it occurs. It returns belatedly, in intrusive and repetitive forms, and for that reason it resists straightforward narration. This idea explains why trauma narratives so often rely on repetition, gaps, and indirection. Felman and Laub [10] add a relational dimension: testimony requires a listener, and the act of witnessing is itself part of how traumatic experience becomes communicable. Herman [6] describes the tension at the heart of trauma as a pull between the wish to deny terrible events and the need to speak of them, which helps explain why silence and speech so often alternate in trauma narratives.

Caruth's model has not gone unchallenged. Balaev [3] argues that an exclusive emphasis on unspeakability and fragmentation overlooks the role of culture, history, and individual circumstance in shaping how trauma is expressed, and she proposes a pluralistic approach that allows for coherent and even articulate trauma narratives. LaCapra [11] similarly distinguishes between acting out, in which the past is compulsively repeated, and working through, in which a measure of critical distance becomes possible. This distinction is useful for the present study because Zusak's novel appears to move between both modes.

Trauma fiction and its linguistic signatures

Whitehead [2] identifies several recurring techniques in trauma fiction: repetition, intertextuality, and narrative fragmentation or indirection. These studies are largely literary rather than linguistic, however. They describe what trauma fiction does, but they seldom pin down its operation at the level of word choice, syntax, or discourse structure. Stylistics offers tools for exactly this task, including the analysis of lexical foregrounding and deviation [4], and conceptual metaphor [12].

Narratology and the question of the narrator

Genette's [5] distinctions among voice, focalization, and time are essential for a novel narrated by a non-human figure who knows the outcome of every story.

Language under totalitarianism

Because The Book Thief sets personal trauma against a regime that weaponised language, work on the discourse of National Socialism is relevant. Klemperer's [13] classic study of the language of the Third Reich shows how vocabulary and rhetoric were used to shape thought and

normalise violence. This provides a historical grounding for the novel's contrast between propaganda and storytelling.

Existing scholarship on the novel

Buráková [8] reads the novel through trauma theory and questions whose suffering the narrative foregrounds, noting that the focus on a German girl complicates conventional victim and perpetrator categories. Domínguez-Rué [9] argues that the novel dramatises the confrontation with traumatic memory through the figure of the word-shaker, linking writing to the preservation of experience that official history would erase. Building on these readings, the present article shifts attention from interpretation of meaning to description of linguistic mechanism.

RESEARCH PROBLEM, AIM, AND QUESTIONS

Research problem

Studies of trauma in literature usually begin from the events characters endure and the psychological conditions they are assumed to display. Less attention has been given to the linguistic means by which a text makes those conditions palpable to a reader. In The Book Thief, trauma emerges across several layers at once: the characters' speech, their private thoughts and memories, the narrator's commentary, and a dense network of symbols. How these layers cooperate has not been described systematically.

The aim is to identify the linguistic features through which the psychological trauma of Liesel Meminger and Max Vandenburg is verbalized in The Book Thief, to analyse the lexical-semantic, stylistic-syntactic, and discourse-level devices involved, and to clarify their functions within the novel.

Objectives

1. To outline the theoretical foundations of trauma representation in literature.
2. To identify the lexical-semantic fields that carry traumatic experience in the novel.
3. To analyse the functions of metaphor, repetition, and symbolism.
4. To examine the roles of interior monologue, dialogue, silence, and memory discourse.
5. To compare how trauma is linguistically represented in the cases of Liesel and Max.
6. To describe the narrative and communicative features of Death as narrator

Research questions

The central question is: Through which linguistic devices is characters' psychological trauma verbalized in The Book Thief, and what functions do these devices perform? Five sub-questions follow from it:

1. Which lexical-semantic fields express traumatic experience?
2. How do metaphor, repetition, and symbol reflect characters' inner states?
3. What roles do interior monologue and memory discourse play?
4. How does the representation of trauma differ between Liesel and Max?
5. How does Death's narration shape the interpretation of traumatic events?

The working hypothesis is that trauma in the novel is expressed predominantly through indirect means, with direct emotional vocabulary playing a minor role, and that the narrator's ironic and symbolic voice compensates for what the characters cannot say.

METHODOLOGY

The study uses a qualitative close-reading design. Four complementary methods were combined.

Linguistic analysis examined emotionally loaded vocabulary, grammatical constructions, and sentence rhythm in passages that depict fear, grief, loneliness, and loss. Stylistic analysis followed the framework of Leech and Short [4] to identify foregrounding, repetition, parallelism, and contrast, and drew on conceptual metaphor theory [12] to interpret figurative language. Contextual analysis was necessary because a word's contribution to the representation of trauma cannot be read off its dictionary meaning; it depends on who speaks, in what situation, and against what background of earlier events. Discourse analysis, informed by Genette [5], traced the relations among narratorial commentary, interior thought, dialogue, and retrospective description.

The primary material consists of episodes centred on Liesel and Max, notably Werner's death and burial, Liesel's nightmares and reading lessons with her foster father, the basement scenes, and Max's hand-made books. The narration of Death is treated as a supplementary corpus. Passages were selected for their salience to traumatic experience and for their representativeness across the novel's structure.

A methodological caveat is essential. Fictional characters cannot be diagnosed, and this study does not attempt to do so. It follows Balaev's [3] insistence that literary trauma should be read in its textual, cultural, and historical context, and it treats "trauma" as a textual effect rather than a clinical category.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Lexical-semantic verbalization

One of the first things a reader notices is how seldom the novel's characters name their emotions. Declarations such as "I am afraid" or "I am grieving" are rare. The traumatic content is carried instead by semantic fields that cluster around specific objects and situations.

For Liesel, the dominant field concerns loss and safety. Her brother's death on the train and the burial that follows are narrated with concrete, almost banal detail, and her theft of a book at the graveside links bereavement to the object that will later become her main emotional resource. The vocabulary of nights, beds, and nightmares reappears throughout the early chapters. Her recurring dreams of the train, together with the foster father who sits with her until she calms, are among the ways the text signals lasting disturbance without ever applying a clinical label. The persistence of such lexis across chapters matters. It creates a kind of semantic return, echoing Caruth's [1] point that traumatic experience recurs rather than remaining in the past.

For Max, a different set of fields dominates: concealment, darkness, enclosure, illness, and obligation. His hiding is also experienced as guilt, since he has left others behind, and the language around him often combines gratitude with unease. Fear and hope coexist in the same lexical environment, producing the ambivalence that characterises persecuted existence.

These differences matter. Liesel's lexicon points toward a lost family and a search for belonging, whereas Max's points toward survival under threat and the burden of having survived at all. The two fields rarely overlap, which supports the view that the novel represents trauma plurally, as Balaev [3] suggests, rather than as a single uniform experience.

Metaphor, symbol, and repetition

Figurative language does much of the work where literal statement would be inadequate. The central symbolic complex of the novel is words and books. Liesel is a thief, but what she steals is language, and the title itself fuses theft and literacy. Books begin as objects of difficulty, since she cannot yet read them, and become tools of consolation, as she reads aloud to frightened neighbours in the shelter during air raids. In conceptual metaphor terms, one might say that

READING IS SHELTER, and the literal basement scenes give this metaphor a concrete setting (see [12] on how bodily and spatial experience grounds abstract thought).

Max's creative work offers a second, darker symbolic register. He covers over pages of a propaganda book and uses them for his own stories, a gesture that literally repurposes the instrument of persecution into a vehicle of testimony. His stories cast the dictator as a figure who plants words in a population, and Liesel as someone who counters this. The ideological language of the regime is thus set against an alternative, humane use of the same medium. This opposition is consistent with Klemperer's [13] account of how the vocabulary of the period was designed to steer thought, and it makes the novel's closing emphasis on storytelling more than a sentimental gesture.

Repetition is equally significant. Recurring images, such as the sky's changing colours, the train, and the basement, function as the intrusive returns that trauma theory predicts [1; 2]. They also bind separate episodes together so that a reader's experience of the text acquires a pattern of return that parallels the characters' own.

It is worth stressing the double nature of language here. The same medium that produces persecution, through slogans and rhetoric, also enables recovery, through reading, writing, and storytelling. This duality is not incidental decoration; it is the novel's central linguistic argument.

Interior monologue, silence, and memory discourse

Trauma is notoriously difficult to speak, and the novel registers this difficulty by routing much of its emotional content through indirect channels. Narratology distinguishes several techniques for rendering consciousness (see [5]), and The Book Thief relies mainly on narrated thought: because Death narrates, characters' inner states are reported rather than voiced, and this gives them a slightly distanced, mediated quality. Direct interior monologue is therefore restricted, and when characters' thoughts do appear, they tend to arrive as brief, compact summaries rather than extended streams of consciousness.

Silence plays a role as well, but it requires careful handling. Pauses, evasions, and unfinished statements in the characters' dialogue can signal that something painful lies beneath the surface. Yet not every silence is traumatic. A character may be silent out of caution, tact, or fear of being overheard, which in a society of informers is entirely rational. Meaning therefore has to be determined from context: from what has happened earlier, who is present, and what the stakes of speaking are. Felman and Laub [10] remind us that testimony depends on a listener, and in the Hubermann household the trusted listener is exactly what Liesel and Max gradually find in each other.

Memory discourse is handled through retrospective framing. Because the narrator tells the story from a point beyond the events and already knows how they end, memory in the novel is not only the characters' but also Death's. The mixture of characters' recollections and the narrator's hindsight produces the temporal layering that Genette [5] would describe as an interplay between story time and narrating time. This layering is one of the principal ways the text conveys belatedness, the sense that events are understood only after the fact.

Comparing Liesel and Max

The two characters illustrate different sources and different forms of expression.

Liesel's trauma originates in family loss and the disruptions of childhood in wartime. She expresses it through behaviour and objects, such as nightmares, a stolen book, and a growing devotion to reading, and later through authorship. Her trajectory moves from near-silence and illiteracy toward articulate narration. In LaCapra's [11] terms, she moves from something close to acting out, in which the past repeats itself involuntarily, toward a limited working through, in which she can write about what happened.

Max's trauma originates in racial persecution and the experience of survival at others' expense. His expression is more explicitly textual from the start. He draws and writes, and his creative acts reflect a need to impose order on a life lived in concealment. His language is shaped by confinement and by the awareness that speech and visibility are dangerous.

What unites them is the discovery that language can bridge isolation. Their relationship, built on exchanged stories, offers a miniature example of what Felman and Laub [10] describe as the witnessing relation. The difference between them is not one of degree but of kind: Liesel's language grows outward into the community, while Max's is forced inward and later reclaimed.

Death as narrator

The choice of Death as narrator is the novel's most conspicuous formal decision, and it has measurable effects on style. In narratological terms, the narrator is heterodiegetic and extradiegetic yet strongly personalised, with a distinctive voice, attitudes, and even vulnerabilities [5].

Several features stand out. First, the narrator's evaluative vocabulary is unusual: Death is weary, tender, and occasionally wry, and describes the dead with a gentleness that complicates the conventional image of the figure. Second, the narrator foregrounds colour, using the sky and its shades as a recurring way of registering human catastrophe; the opening lines announce this habit directly. Third, the narrative breaks its own flow with typographically marked asides, bolded announcements, and bracketed commentary, which interrupt and redirect the reader's attention. Such devices may be read as formal analogues of the interruptions that trauma imposes on ordinary narration [2]. Fourth, the narrator spoils outcomes in advance, a technique that moves emotional force away from suspense and toward witness: readers are not asked what will happen but how it will feel.

Death's closing admission that it is haunted by humans is the novel's most memorable statement of this stance. It reverses the usual relation between mortality and the living and positions the narrator as one more witness burdened by memory. Importantly, Death's voice must not be confused with the characters' own. The narrator reports and interprets characters' states, and that interpretation is a layer of meaning in its own right. The irony and tenderness of the narration act as a buffer for the reader, making painful material bearable, while the narrator's candour about loss prevents that buffer from becoming evasion.

DISCUSSION

The analysis shows that trauma in The Book Thief is not carried by any single device. It is distributed across three interacting levels.

1. Lexical-semantic level. Fields of loss, concealment, safety, and guilt anchor the content of traumatic experience, and they differ in distribution between Liesel and Max.
2. Stylistic-syntactic level. Metaphor, symbol, repetition, and typographical interruption give that content its texture and convey the intrusive, returning quality emphasised in trauma theory [1; 2].
3. Discourse-narrative level. Narrated thought, silence, retrospective framing, and the narrator's voice organise how experience is communicated to the reader and place it within a broader historical frame.

These levels reinforce one another. A lexical field gains force when it recurs as an image; an image gains depth when the narrator frames it retrospectively. This cumulative design supports the working hypothesis that trauma is conveyed mainly indirectly. It also lends partial support to both sides of the debate in trauma theory. The novel's fragmentation, repetition, and belatedness

align with Caruth's [1] model, while its relative coherence, its cultural specificity, and its movement toward articulate testimony align more closely with Balaev's [3] pluralistic view.

The novel also illustrates the dual power of language. Propaganda shapes worldviews and legitimises cruelty [13], yet stories keep memory alive and sustain human relationships. This contrast gives the book its moral shape and explains why a study of trauma and a study of language cannot be separated here.

Limitations

This study is based on qualitative close reading of selected passages and therefore cannot claim exhaustive coverage. The analysis relies on an English-language text and does not address translation effects, which could be significant given that the novel is set in a German-speaking context and uses German words for emphasis. Furthermore, the study makes no claim about readers' actual responses; reception research would be needed to test whether the effects described here are experienced as such.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that psychological trauma in The Book Thief is a linguistic construction as much as a narrative subject. Lexical fields, figurative language, repetition, narrated thought, silence, and the voice of Death combine to produce an experience of loss and persecution that the reader receives indirectly and cumulatively. Liesel's experience, rooted in family loss and wartime childhood, is voiced through the acquisition of language and eventual authorship. Max's experience, rooted in persecution and survival, is voiced through confinement and creative resistance. Death mediates both, framing individual suffering within a wider historical and moral horizon.

The broader implication is that language in the novel is double-edged. It can serve ideology and cause harm, and it can serve memory and preserve humanity. Reading trauma through linguistic form therefore complements the thematic and theoretical readings offered by Buráková [8] and Domínguez-Rué [9] by showing how the effects they describe are actually produced on the page.

Several directions for future work follow. Corpus-assisted analysis could quantify the lexical fields identified here. Comparative studies could examine other contemporary novels of war and loss. Research on translations could show how trauma-related effects survive or change across languages. Finally, reader-response studies could test whether the mechanisms described in this article shape how audiences experience the text.

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