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Colloquial English in Hester Piozzi’s ‘Parlour Window’

Pragmatics and sociolinguistics offer a systematic analysis of human interactions produced in talkative everyday situations, identifying purpose and context of the users. Deductive hypothesis on how the spoken code may once have been in Early/Late Modern English, have been provided by historical linguists (Salmon 1965) who, in recent studies (Culpeper / Kytö 2010), on the basis of Corpus Linguistics, have carried out a comparative, diachronical analysis. Traditional language models are based on writing, but it is speech in its social context that mainly represents the language, even the language of the past. “Speech-related written genres” like dialogues, trials, plays (Culpeper / Kytö 2010: 2) seem to be a good representation of spoken face-to-face interactions. Hester Lynch Piozzi’s British Synonymy or An attempt at regulating the choice of words in familiar conversation, a work in two volumes published in 1794, is organized as a dictionary, but, in fact, it is a pretext for telling anecdotes and personal thoughts in a conversational style. This article, meant to be a descriptive contribution on Piozzi’s work, is divided in two parts: the first is a brief overview of the transcription of the oral code tradition in English culture based on the usage and custom more than norms and rules. In the second part, through the richly commented definitions of words Piozzi gives, from a discourse analysis perspective we try to detect the pragmatic function of some typical features of conversational style and concentrate on some rhetorical strategies employed by the author to create proximity with her reader.

1. Introduction

In the 17th and 18th centuries great attention was devoted to the English Language which in previous centuries had been considered imperfect compared with Latin and other European languages, and even barbarous².

¹ The authors discussed and conceived the paper jointly. Gabriella Di Martino is responsible for sections 1, 1.1 and 2 and Sole Alba Zollo is responsible for section 3, 4 and 5.

² Roger Ascham wrote his *Toxophilus* (1545) in English, a language, he writes, which sounds “so meanly, both for the matter and handling that no man can do worse” (in Rev. Dr. Giles 1965 *The whole works of Roger Ascham with A Life of the Author*, New York, vol. II: 6-7).

Lord Chesterfield in 1754 denounced that “our language is at present in a state of anarchy [...] Toleration, adoption and naturalization have run their length. Good order and authority are now necessary” (Chesterfield 1754: 124). The linguistic production in the 18th – treatises, grammar books and dictionaries – deals mainly with the codification and standardization of the written code defined through a process of “Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue” in Jonathan Swift’s words, in order to be able to meet the needs of the new issues of journalism (Brownlee 2011; 2012) and to popularize the scientific discoveries (Gotti 1996; Taavitsainen 1999; 2011), as prescribed by the Royal Society that “have exacted from their members a close, naked, natural way of speaking [...] preferring the language of Artizans, Countrymen and Merchants, before that of Wits and Scholars” (Sprat 1667: 117-18).

The majority of dictionaries and grammar books published during the 18th century³ were prescriptive, based on an analogy with Latin. ‘Custom’ and ‘use’ alone of learned and educated people were not considered enough to create a linguistic standard. Nevertheless, in English culture the tradition of describing real language in use goes back to Ben Jonson’s Grammar⁴, based on Quintilian’s well-known statement “Custome is the most certaine Mistresse of Language”, echoed by Defoe “Custom [...] is now our best authority for words”⁵ and Horace’s verses⁶ which were well-known to grammarians, rhetoricians, and orthoepists convinced that only a general consensus of the users of a language could create norms and rules⁷. The oral code of the language was very far from the written one which had been

³ Among the most popular we can mention Robert Lowth’s *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762: 1) where he states that the grammarian’s “duty is to teach us to express ourselves with propriety, and to be able to judge of every phrase and form of construction, [...] The plain way of doing this is to lay down rules”, and Lindley Murray’s *English Grammar Adapted to Different Classes of Learners*, (1795: 179) where, with very imposing rules he affirms that “to preserve propriety in our words and phrases, we must avoid low expressions, supply defective words, avoid using the same word in different senses [...] avoid unintelligible words”.

⁴ *English Grammar, made by Ben Jonson for the benefit of all strangers out of his observation of the English Language now spoken and in use*, 1640, published posthumously in London, 1756, in *The Works of Ben Johnson*, vol. 7.

⁵ Defoe Daniel, *An Essay upon Projects* (1697) in Morley H. 1889 London.

⁶ “Multa renascentur quae iam cecidere cadentque / quae nunc sunt in honore vocabula, si volet usus / Quem penes arbitrium est et ius norma loquendi” (*De Arte Poetica*, vv. 70-72).

⁷ We can mention John Hughes who affirms “the Usage is the Sole arbiter and norm of speech” in his *Essay Of Style* (1698). Also for Noah Webster correctness and good grammar come from the codification of language use.

codified and standardized. This began to be taken into great account in the 16th and 17th centuries personal correspondence (Dossena / Del Lungo 2012) in trial proceedings and in plays (Culpeper / Kytö 2010). It can also be traced in phrase books and in didactic familiar dialogues (Di Martino 1993, 1999, 2000; Fries 1998) which were meant to teach the language as it was really spoken by people⁸. Speech has an important role, for instance, in Thomas Sheridan's *British Education* 1756 in which "a revival of the art of speaking" is highly suggested.

Doctor Johnson in his *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) describes the words and proposes their meanings in the various contexts in which they are used. All this leads to conversation and the 18th is indeed the age of the art of conversation⁹. Samuel Johnson was a great wit and one of the most admired conversationalists of his time. People gathered around him in coffeehouses with other local residents to discuss matters of mutual interest. In Dr. Johnson's words:

The pleasure which men are able to give in conversation, holds no stated proportion to their knowledge or their virtue. [...] No stile of conversation is more extensively acceptable than the narrative. He who has stored his memory with slight anecdotes, private incidents, and personal peculiarities, seldom fails to find his audience favourable (Johnson 1752: 138).

And again: "In conversation we naturally diffuse our thoughts, and in writing we contract them." (Johnson 1753).

This is exactly what we can see in Hester Piozzi's work. In *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson* she reports, in direct speech, several conversations with his mentor who once had declared "There is in this world no real delight (excepting those of sensuality), but exchange of ideas in conversation". In *British Synonymy*, where synonyms appear to be a mere pretext, Hester Lynch Piozzi focuses on the art of conversation to guide foreigners to a real conversational language. The work is full of

⁸ See for instance John Florio, *His Firste Fruits* (1578), Jacques Bellot, *Familiar Dialogue* (1586), Claudius Holyband, *The French Littleton* (1609), Guy Miege, *Nouvelle Methode* (1685).

⁹ Jonathan Swift in his *A Complete Collection of genteel and ingenious Conversation, according to the most polite mode and method now used at Court, and in the best Companies of England*, published in 1738, gives ironic commentary on the conversation among the upper classes in early-18th century Great Britain and represents a sort of guide for those lacking in conversational skill.

suggestions on structure and colloquial lexicon which in fact was considered cant, vulgar and too colloquial. In the last two decades of the 18th century “colloquial” as an adjective often co-occurs with words denoting “inaccuracy” and “vulgarity”, in various forms of “inaccurate”, “incorrect” and “inelegant”, with forms of “low”, in the sequences “colloquial barbarism” and “vulgar” (Percy 2002). “Colloquial”, “barbarous” and “vulgar” are the most frequently mentioned adjectives in the reviews coeval with Piozzi’s *British Synonymy*.

1.1. *Conversational rhetoric and women in the Eighteenth Century*

Among the prolific publication of grammar books and dictionaries whose task was to safeguard and improve culture, a noteworthy production of various works on the language by women authors appeared, aimed at making grammar and vocabulary accessible to foreigners and to children. These authors¹⁰ were well aware of the duty of mothers to teach their children how to speak and write properly. Deviations from the standard were considered “looseness”, “slackness”, “laxity” and linguistic imperfections were identified with moral imperfections.

Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi, conversationalist and author, married to an Italian musician, mother of 12 children, seems to fit perfectly into this trend of writing.

A theory of conversational rhetoric to achieve social power was constructed during the century and it consisted in periodical essays, novels, correspondence and literary conversations. “The number of courtesy works on conversation [...] has been estimated to amount to over two hundred titles between the years 1650 and 1800” (Berger 1994: 82). Very popular were also the translations from Cicero who, in *De Officiis*, had stated the importance of conversation within the rhetorical studies, taken in settings like “social circles, in philosophical debates, and in meetings of friends, and also after banquets” (Smith 2007: 5). On the whole, rhetoric was considered as a public and masculine discipline; women had no access to

¹⁰ Elizabeth Elstob, *The Rudiments of Grammar for the English-Saxon Tongue, First given in English with an Apology for the Study of Northern Antiquities*, (1715); Anne Fisher, *Practical New Grammar, With Exercises of Bad English: or, An Easy Guide to Speaking and Writing the English Language Properly and Correctly* (1745); Anne Fisher, *New Spelling Dictionary, and Expositor of the English Language* (1788); Jane Marcet, *Mary’s Grammar Interpersed with Stories and Intended for the Use of Children* (1735); Susanna Rowson, *Spelling Dictionary* (1807).

university so they had no possibilities to study it since this type of education could even foster immorality. Women, though, were very interested in rhetoric, so conversational gatherings, such as coffeehouses and Bluestocking salons, attended mainly by women, became a fertile ground where to learn and train a rhetoric of conversation in public. In 1707 the first rhetorical handbook explicitly addressed to women made its appearance anonymously. “If *The Lady's Rhetorick* can truly be considered an early feminist rhetorical handbook, it would contribute evidence that a subculture favoring women's rhetorical education and practice was stronger than previously supposed” (Smith 2004: 351).

Rhetoric theory and its rules were applied to everyday uses, to conversational situations relevant to women's experience. The tradition of rhetoric for women continued with Madeleine de Scudery, the French author whose book, translated into English with the title *The Female Orators*, was published in 1714. Private female conversation was well distinguished from public male conversation. Hester Piozzi together with Elizabeth Montague and a few other ladies had the opportunity to learn and practice public conversation. “To eighteenth-century women, conversational gatherings were more than merely training grounds for written publication or for men's formal oratory. They were already sites for public rhetorical performances” (Smith 2007: 6).

2. *Piozzi's Parlour window*

Hester Lynch Piozzi was a very learned woman, with an excellent classical education and a high standard of competence in the Italian and French languages. She transgressed the social codes of so-called feminine behaviour, aiming at professional independence in the literary world (D'Ezio 2010). She was an enterprising lady and travelled throughout Europe together with her husband Henry Thrale and with Dr. Johnson with whom she was close friend, correspondent and hostess. On her coming back to England, in 1789, after a long time spent in Italy, she published *Observations and Reflections made in the Course of a Journey through France, Italy and Germany*. After her controversial second marriage to the Italian musician Gabriel Piozzi, Hester opened her salon to converse with her intellectual friends, in doing so building a reputation

of a “surprisingly resilient career of social eminence as a conversation hostess, as an intellectual companion of eminent men and women, and as an author” (Smith 2007: 9). Her friendship with Dr. Collier, very familiar with Henry Fielding and with the grammarian James Harris, started when Hester was 18 and Collier, “a Man of perfect Worth, profound Erudition, and polish’d Manners” (Piozzi 1942, vol. 1: 297), tutored Hester before her marriage and had such a strong influence on her life that, she declared “his influence... operated on my Mind on almost every Occasion” (Piozzi 1942, vol. 1: 305). Collier taught Hester that sincerity is not always good and that talking is more important than listening in everyday familiar life and women should study rhetoric to use it in the private sphere, “Women should learn rhetorick in order to persuade their husbands, while men studied to render themselves good logicians, for the sake of obtaining arms against female oratory” (*British Synonymy*¹¹, vol. 1: v-vi).

Well known is the extreme influence Samuel Johnson had over Hester’s education. She was encouraged by the writer in her development of conversational art and learned that all our knowledge is important and becomes socially useful only if we are able to communicate it, which she put into practice, in fact she had great success in supporting her husband in his brewery business and later even in sustaining him in winning the political election. In Hester’s Circle social and political news were discussed in mixed-sex intellectual chatty meetings, often reported in *British Synonymy*. The book “intended chiefly for a parlour window” (*BS*, vol. 1: iv) is “wholly and solely colloquial” (*BS*, vol. 2: 61) and its central theme is that a language in use is much more important than the study of grammar or rhetoric. In conversing one can find “the niceties of language that books never teach, and conversation alone can establish” (*BS*, vol. 2: 29).

British Synonymy was influenced by Hester’s familiarity with Dr. Johnson, in fact she asserts “my acquaintance with him consisted in little else than talking” and against her critics’ attacks she states:

My ‘Synonyms’ have been reviewed at last. The critics are all civil for aught I see, and nearly just, except when they say that Johnson left some fragments of a work upon synonymy: of which God knows I never heard till now one syllable; never had he and I, in all the time we lived together any conversation upon the subject (Piozzi 1942: 304).

¹¹ From now on the abbreviation *BS* will be used in the quotes.

Piozzi's theory is that books should be written in colloquial and idiomatic language expressed by cultivated people. Her style is deliberately colloquial, but not vulgar, her "mode of drawing room conversation [...] was intimate, social, friendly" (McCarthy 1988: 96). The author's determined choice to present expressions and phrases belonging to familiar talk is explicit in the subheading *An Attempt at regulating the choice of words in Familiar Conversation*. "The selection of words in conversation and elegant colloquial language a book may give assistance, the Author, with that deference she so justly owes a generous public, modestly offers he's" (*BS*, vol. 1: ii). She is aware of the usefulness of books so she offers hers. Hence the book has been written to help foreigners, particularly Italians, to use an elegant colloquial English and the author underlines the fact that the book is about familiar talk, in fact she states that "while men teach to write with propriety, a woman may at worst be qualified – through long practice – to direct the choice of phrases in familiar talk" (*BS*, vol. 1: ii). Piozzi's main claim is that "conversation comes in to fix the rule" and not the other way round and we "must begin to learn from custom, more than science" (*BS*, vol. 1: 72).

As previously mentioned, women started to be interested in rhetoric but socially they had to deny this knowledge and Piozzi herself states this in the *Preface*. The method and purpose of her book are clear from the beginning and through the entire work she develops her theories.

Piozzi was well aware that it is not that important to distinguish between words which are synonymous but to use the colloquial register of language. The selection of lexical items Piozzi lists in her work has nothing to do with the work of lexicographers or logicians. They define words, on the contrary Piozzi's intention is to point out the choice of the words in their use which strictly depends on the context where the communication takes place, "the place in which they should stand" (*BS*, vol. 1: v) and also on the strength and the elegance they express. The examples she provides in *British Synonymy* testify that Hester takes into great account the varieties of language, in fact she chooses the words according to the different kinds of situations, people and subjects.

Both *Observations and Reflections* and *British Synonymy* were not well accepted by readers and reviewers. Horace Walpole defined the *Observations* ungraceful, full of colloquial barbarisms like "said I, said he" and empty terms and expressions like "to be sure", "dear, dear".

The style, indeed, of the whole is unequal, sometimes elegant, forcible, and decorated, at other times inaccurate, ungraceful, and degraded by the introduction of *vulgarisms*: *Said I*, and *Said he* occur too frequently, and we are wearied with inelegant usage of the particle *how*, instead of *that*, which deforms almost every *tenth* page (Burney 1786: 383).

Elizabeth Carter in a letter to Elizabeth Montague wrote that Piozzi's prose is "writ with spirit, acuteness and much sensible observation. The style is sometimes elegant, sometimes colloquial and vulgar, and strangely careless in the grammatical part, which one should not expect from the writer's classical knowledge" (Montague 1817: 314). When *British Synonymy* was published Walpole expressed a harsh evaluation of the author "Methink she had better have studied them before she stuffed her travels with so many vulgarisms" (Lewis 1865: 412). A reference to *British Synonymy* appeared in the *Introduction to Nouveaux dictionnaire universel des synonymes de la langue francaise* by the French synonymist Francois Guizot who defines Piozzi's work "peu estimé" (Guizot 1809: xxxi) and singles out a mistake in the entry *Hound, Greyhound, Harrier, Terrier*, terms given as synonyms while they correspond, he says, "to chien de chasse, chien couchant, chien basset, which are not at all synonyms" (Guizot 1809: xxi).

Compared to France (Girard 1718) books of synonymy appeared late in England¹² and synonymy was one of the last sections to appear in the English dictionary, because "just discrimination between words of almost identical meaning requires not only an authoritative dictionary and grammar as tools but a relatively settled state of the language and a body of recognized opinion on questions of usage" (Noyes 1951: 951). It could be of some interest to read how Dr. Johnson defines synonyms in the *Preface* to his *Dictionary*:

Words are seldom exactly synonymous: a new term was not introduced, but because the former was thought inadequate: names therefore, have

¹² Some references to synonymy in Early Modern English can be traced in *The Excellencies of the English Tongue* written by Carew in 1595. "Synonymy as identity of denotative meaning is what Cariew had in mind regarding his translational equivalents of *fortis* [...] Synonymy appears to be equated with substitutability in a given text or situation (including paraphrases). In the 1611 *Authorized Version of the Bible* a naïve concept of synonymy is mentioned 'a statement which equates synonymy and identity of reference: hee using words... and indifferently for one thing in nature'" (Görlach 1991: 195).

often many ideas, but few ideas have many names. It was then necessary to use the proximate word, for the deficiency of single terms can very seldom be supplied by circumlocution: nor is the inconvenience great of such mutilated interpretation, because the sense may easily be collected entire from the examples [...] kindred senses may be so interwoven, that the perplexity cannot be disentangled, nor any reason be assigned why one should be ranged before the other. [...] The shades of meaning sometimes pass imperceptibly into each other; so that though on one side they apparently differ, yet it is impossible to mark the point of contact (Johnson 1755: 142).

A proper text on synonymy made its appearance for the first time in England in 1766 with John Trusler's *Difference between Words Esteemed Synonymous in the English Language; and the proper choice of them determined: together with so much of the Abbé Girard's Treatise, on this subject, as would agree, with our mode of expression*, which was mainly a translation of the 1718 study of synonyms by Abbé Gabriel Girard, *La Justesse de la langue française*. The second publication was Piozzi's. In the first volume of *British Synonymy*, in presenting the pairing "identity" and "sameness", Piozzi explains that they "would be nearly synonymous in conversation language, I believe, only that as the first [IDENTITY] is a word pregnant with metaphysical controversy, we avoid it in common daily use, or at best take it up nearly as a stronger expression of unchangeable SAMENESS." (*BS*, vol. 1: 295). *British Synonymy* has been considered a political reactionary project and the author amplifies the distance "between the same and the identical as she increases the distance between French and British, between philosopher and patriot" (Pasanek 2009).

3. *Discourse analysis*

Within the framework of Discourse Analysis (DA), this paper aims to detect the linguistic and rethorical features, typical of conversation, in order to show the multidimensional nature of the text under investigation and how spoken and written styles intermingle with each other. Moreover, since a wide range of research (Hunston / Thompson 2000; Bondi / Mauranen 2003; Hyland 2005) have demonstrated that written texts embody interactions between the writer and his/her readers, we have also

highlighted the linguistic features of writer and reader positioning in the text. Referring to the model of interaction developed by Hyland (2005), we verify also how Piozzi tries to interact with her audience through both stance and engagement.

Discourse is a key concept to understand society as well as language itself. It can be identified both in written and spoken communication and it has been conceptualized in different ways. First introduced by Zellig Harris in 1952 to analyse connected speech and writing, discourse analysis investigates the forms, practices, structures, and functions of everyday discourse. It focuses on language beyond words, clauses, phrases and sentences and takes into account the relationship between language and the social and cultural context in which it is used, being language in use. Candlin affirms:

‘Discourse’ ... refers to language in use as a process which is socially situated. However... we may go on to discuss the constructive and dynamic role of either spoken or written discourse in structuring areas of knowledge and the social and institutional practices which are associated with them. In this sense discourse is a means of talking and writing about and acting upon worlds, a means which both constructs and is constructed by a set of social practices within these worlds, and in so doing both reproduces and constructs afresh particular social discursive practices, constrained or encouraged by more macro movements in the overarching social formation. (Candlin 1997: iix)

Since DA has been applied to various disciplines, it is not possible to have a singular perspective. In fact, even though a great deal of researchers stress the concept of language in use, there is a large body of opinion that emphasises that discourse is beyond language in use. “Discourse is language use relative to social, political and cultural formations - it is language reflecting social order but also language shaping social order, and shaping individuals’ interaction with society” (Jaworski / Coupland 2006: 3).

DA takes into account the several differences between written and spoken language. They both present grammatical intricacy but it seems that written discourse is more lexically dense presenting more content words than function words, a high level of nominalization and postmodifiers which qualify nouns. Oral texts are characterized by more

repetition, redundancy and hesitation, pauses and fillers to allow speakers to think about what they want to say. Nevertheless, as stated by Biber (1998), there are not absolute differences between spoken and written texts in terms of the predominance of specific linguistic characteristics.

Evaluation, known also as appraisal or stance, is a significant element of our lives and it pervades discourses. It is almost impossible to communicate both orally and in a written code without expressing judgements. Whenever human beings interact they interpret and evaluate determining their personalities. Evaluation is multifunctional since it can be used to express the writer's opinion, to build relations between the writer and the reader, and to organize the text. For Hunston / Thompson (2000: 5) *evaluation* is a

“broad cover term for the expression of the speaker's or writer's attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about. That attitude may relate to certainty or obligation or desirability or any of a number of other sets of values”.

Linguistic resources such as hedges, questions, reporting verbs, personal pronouns have been analysed in Piozzi's work for the persuasive role they play. According to Hyland (2005) writer-reader interactions can be expressed in two ways: stance and engagement. Stance is an “attitudinal dimension” and comprises linguistic features such as hedges, boosters, attitude markers and self-mentions, in so doing we see how Piozzi presents herself and conveys her opinions. Engagement is an “alignment dimension” and is expressed through reader pronouns, personal asides, appeals to shared knowledge, directives and questions and through these features we see how our author connects to her reader.

4. *Conversational rhetorical features in British Synonymy*

In the two volumes of *British Synonymy (BS)* the words listed are analysed in brief essays ranging from one to ten pages in length, 1180 words in 315 entries.

Hester Piozzi is much more interested in seeing the words in context rather than giving definitions, as stated before. This point is clearly

expressed when, for instance, she explains the difference between “action” and “gesticulation”. “The great difference here seems bestowed by the words on their places, or rather by the places indeed upon the words. We call that ACTION on a theatre, which is GESTICULATION in a room” (*BS*, vol. 1: 257).

The author aims to make the reader understand the meaning of a group of words using them in stories which she tries to make “clear”, “plain” and “brief”, the three qualities which a narrative should have, as pointed out by *The Lady's Rhetorick*.

“A narrative consists in reciting or representing the Deed, Fact, or Matter in question. A learned *Roman* informs us, that it ought to have three Qualities: An Appearance of Truth, that we may believe it; Plainness, that the Hearers may not be puzzled; and Brevity, that we may not weary them” (*The Lady's Rhetorick* 1707: 47).

British Synonymy is a condensed example of rhetorical and persuasive strategies. In particular, by downplaying the book it seems that Piozzi uses it as a strategy to avoid critics or censures. She explains the meaning of the terms “fault, error, offence, defect, mistake” mentioning her book as an example of imperfection: “If then in the course of this little work some few DEFECTS may be discovered, let not the FAULTS be magnified into OFFENCES. Some MISTAKES will always happen from negligence, and some from ERROR” (*BS*, vol. 1: 233).

On the whole she wants to appear as an amateur and repeats a conventional female apology for intruding on male lexicographical prerogative. She expresses her admiration for Girard's “delicacy of discrimination and felicity of expression” (*BS*, vol. 1: vii), but her purpose, she insists, is only to help foreigners in familiar conversation: “I profess however to teach *talk* only, not *language*, and to teach that only to foreigners” (*BS*, vol. 1: 235). She stresses the limitations of her book that she defines as “my little book”, “my weak attempt”, “this little work”, and “intended chiefly for a parlour window and acknowledging itself unworthy of a place upon a library shelf” (*BS*, vol. 1: iv).

In volume two, when she defines the concept of *oratory*, *eloquence*, and *rhetoric*, she explains the difference and distinguishes the meaning of the three words. “Oratory – she states – is a charming thing, Eloquence a fine thing, and Rhetorick a great thing – for it comprises them both” (*BS*,

vol. 2: 85) but she also points out that she has met silent orators who have been able to touch the audience's hearts more than any tropes or rhetorical figures. "Phraseology is confounded and invention frozen before the genuine expression of a throbbing heart" (*BS*, vol. 2: 83). In talking about oratory skills she goes back again to the concept that rhetoric is not a male domain: "I have a friend particularly eminent in such powers of charming her audience [...], however, Mrs. P – will acknowledge that the very rules and terms of rhetoric are unknown to *her*" (*BS*, vol. 2: 83-84).

At that time men started to feel threatened by the emergence of women writers which is evident for example from the comments on *British Synonymy* made by her male contemporaries. One of her reviewers defines it an "usurpation" of a genre which is traditionally masculine and states:

We were glad to see that so useful and desirable a work was undertaken in our own country by a lady of a classical education, who has spent the chief part of her life in the study of literature and in conversations with the learned: but we could not help being a little envious and ashamed that the honour of this enterprise should have been usurped in England by a female... and who shall say that this envy may not vent itself in a little severity, in our remarks upon a work which has defrauded our sex of that superiority to which it has long laid claim? (*Monthly Rev.* 1794: 242; quoted in McCarthy 1988: 103).

The words "woman" and "writer" must be dissociated. The woman is a domestic creature, she can arrange flowers but not a book on synonymy.

Piozzi does not analyze their meanings directly and she does not give definitions since for her "although the final cause of definition is to fix the true and adequate meaning of words or terms, without knowledge of which we stir not a step in logic; yet here we must not suffer ourselves to be so detained, as synonymy has more to do with elegance than truth" (*BS*, vol. 1: v). The work has more of an illustrative value than in definitions and etymologies as can be seen in the following example:

A BOLD man is one who speaks blunt truths, out of season perhaps, and is likely enough to be called saucy, though naturally unwilling to be so. Clytus was bold when he thwarted Alexander's pride at the feast; and Sir Thomas More lost one of the Wisest heads ever worn by man, through his honest boldness, or bold honesty (*BS*, vol. 1: 56).

Piozzi tends to avoid etymology, although, at times there are references to the roots of some entries (see excerpts 1 and 2) even if they seem to be her conjectures.

Excerpts 1

[...] the NOMINAL DISTINCTION of *titans* came from a Gaulish or Celtic compound, *tud* earth, pronounced *tit*, and *tan* spreading, an overspreading people [...] (*BS*, vol. 2: 47).

Excerpts 2

BRANCH, ARM OF A TREE, BOUGH, ARE nearly if not entirely synonymous: the two first have the same root as to etymology I believe¹³; and bough is a Saxon word not far distant in meaning certainly (*BS*, vol. 1: 64).

The author places together words with similar meanings or words which are often used incorrectly as synonyms by foreigners. Her personal and free interpretation, underlined by *personal asides* (Hyland 2005) such as “I believe, I am not sure, I have seen, I saw her”, is dominant and she cleverly and wittily embodies words in stories. The vivacious conversations reflect her personality and experiences, in fact she includes wonderful anecdotes and curious stories, as in the following excerpt:

With regard to mere GRACE, I am not sure which produces most pleasing sensations in the beholder – which, in a word, gives most delight – well varied and nicely studied ELEGANCE, carried to perfection, though by an inferior form, as in the younger Vestris – or that pure natural charm resulting from a SYMMETRIC figure put into easy motion by pleasure or surprise, as I have seen in the late lady Coventry. To both attesting spectators have often manifested their just admiration, by repeated bursts of applause – particularly to the countess, who, calling for her carriage one night at the theatre – I saw her – stretched out her arm with such peculiar, such inimitable manner, as forced a loud and sudden clap from all the pit and galleries; which she, conscious of her charms, delighted to increase and pro-long, by turning round with a familiar smile to reward the enraptured company (*BS*, vol. 1: 43-44).

Telling stories is a traditional rhetorical feature and Sarbin (1989) states

¹³ From now on underlining is added by the authors.

that usually writers use story-telling to convey concepts in an easier way, but above all to account for their emotions, to share them with the readers. The story and the characters put the narrator's feelings into context involving him/her emotionally and creating empathy with the reader. Narrative is one of the most powerful persuasive strategies available. Stories are organized into structured units and these patterns reflect cultural and subjective ways of arranging knowledge and affect into discourse (Labov / Waletzky 1997; Labov 2006). They do not represent events in an objective or impartial manner, even though they might be *objectifying devices* (ways of claiming or constructing an air of factuality).

[...] But even 'factual' narratives are intimately tied to the narrator's point of view, and the events recounted in a narrative are his/her (re)constructions rather than some kind of objective mirror-image of reality. The first instance of the narrator's subjectivity is present in what s/he chooses to narrate, what s/he finds 'tellable' or 'reportable' (Jaworski / Coupland 2006: 32).

As far as the text structure is concerned, Piozzi introduces reported speech in her narration, either indirect (excerpt 3) and direct quotation (excerpt 4), which is commonly used to capture the reader's attention to the most interesting parts of the story.

Excerpt 3

The tale told by Baretti, from Gasparo Gozzi, in a book little read, elucidates all our synonymy very well, and may lighten the weight of a dull article or chapter. I was walking then, says the gay Venetian, upon our Rialto yester evening, and stopped to observe a blind old man, led by a beautiful woman in the prime of life (*BS*, vol. 2: 203).

Excerpt 4

"Fondness," said Dr. Johnson, "is rather the hasty and injudicious attribution of excellence, somewhat beyond the power of attainment, to the object of our affection" (*BS*, vol. 1: 19).

Reported speech, as a form of recontextualization, has been widely and systematically investigated by discourse analysts. Scholars from different fields including linguistics, sociology, communication have paid attention to the linguistic strategy of embedding other people's utterances

in texts, both oral and written. Several authors have underlined the semantic and syntactic differences between direct and indirect speech (Clark / Gerrig 1990; Lucy 1993). On the contrary for Tannen this distinction is fuzzy and “even seemingly ‘direct’ quotation is ‘constructed dialogue’, that is, primarily the creation of the Speaker rather than the party quoted” (1989: 99). According to others such as Linell (1998) direct and indirect quotation is a rhetorical device placed in a text with a precise communicative purpose. In the work under investigation for example deictic forms such as personal pronouns “I, you”, verb tense, and quotation marks shift the reader’s attention toward either a direct quotation or an indirect quotation.

Giving examples is a very effective feature of rhetorical strategy as they create vivid images in the readers’ mind. Lucas (1992: 122) points out:

Research has shown that vivid, concrete examples have more impact on listeners’ beliefs and actions than any other kind of supporting material. Without examples, ideas seem vague, impersonal, and lifeless. With examples, ideas become specific, personal and lively. One kind of example recurrent in the discourse is extended example which involves the use of anecdotes. Recounting an anecdote falls under the rhetorical strategy known as ‘narration’.

Piozzi’s work contains a conspicuous number of situational examples which show the well established pragmatic principles that words have a precise use depending on the people who utter them, the places where they are pronounced and the subject they deal with. Often a series of entertaining examples are given, set out at the end of each section:

ESTEEM, VENERATION, REGARD, VALUE

Though the second of these substantives does most certainly include all the rest, yet may they all subsist, and are actually oftenest found without it.

EXAMPLE

Every man has in the course of a moderately long life, set I suppose an immense VALUE upon some mistress little deserving his ESTEEM, some servant who never merited his REGARD, or on some friend who had still fewer claims to his VENERATION [...] (*BS*, vol. 1: 201).

Most of the time, instead of discussing the entry she incorporates the

examples in the texts underlining the intended practical and conversational allure. For instance, in the section explaining the verbs “to elect, to select, to choose”, we are given a series of embodied examples:

TO ELECT, TO SELECT, TO CHOOSE,

THESE verbs, though nearly synonymous are yet appropriated in the language of conversation, where a lady will tell you that she has no power to CHOOSE her own partner even in a dance, but must wait till the master of the ceremonies has gone round to SELECT among the gentlemen present one for that purpose. If he is of consideration in the country, and likely to be ELECTED member of parliament for the borough, at his father's death, she will notwithstanding be well enough pleased with his choice, and her mother will take tickets next season for the master's benefit ball to shew her gratitude for this mark of his attention, and to secure its continuance till her daughters are disposed of (*BS*, vol. 1: 192).

Indeed, *The Lady's Rhetoric* had already underlined the power of examples as an important stratagem in mixed-sex conversations:

As the Judicial Gender requires Authorities to strengthen the Reasons that are in dispute, and the Demonstrative Comparisons to represent the Party prais'd like some illustrious person; so the Deliberative, that I now mention, should have Examples to insinuate what we deign to persuade. For as Examples are like Images, that were present to the Mind, they commonly have more power than Reasoning alone (*The Lady's Rhetorick* 1707: 21).

Moreover, the use of the booster “certainly”, the hedge “may” and the attitude marker “I suppose” indicates Piozzi's commitment to the proposition and in this case from certainty passing by epistemic attitude to affective attitude. Even though the book has many examples taken from everyday situations, the author cannot avoid showing her well educated background knowledge and she enriches her work with several references to French, English, Greek and Roman history, philosophy, literature and culture. For instance, she explains the meaning of “melody, harmony and music”, using a lot of literary and philosophical references as examples.

[...] where the original thought, however, like Corregio's Magdalen in the Dresden Gallery set round with jewels, is lost in the blaze of accompaniment, our loss is the less if *that* thought should be somewhat

coarse or indelicate; but MUSICK of this kind pleases an Italian ear far less than do Sacchini's sweetly soothing MELODIES, never overlaid by that fulness of HARMONY with which German composers sometimes perplex instead of informing their hearers. [...] With regard to MUSICK, Plato said long ago, that if any considerable alteration took place in the MUSICK of a country, he should, from that single circumstance, predict innovation in the laws, a change of customs, and subversion of the government. Rousseau, in imitation of this sentiment, which he had probably read translated as well as myself, actually foretold it of the French, without acknowledging whence his idea sprung; and truly did he foretell it [...] (*BS*, vol. 2: 22-23).

The non restrictive that-clause “which he had probably read *translated as well as myself*” is here a stratagem to explicitly signal the author's presence and how she stands in relation to the argument and the reader. Citing authorities is an accepted persuasive form of evidence. As clearly expressed in excerpts 5 and 6, Piozzi supports her ideas reporting the opinions of celebrities of the time such as Addison, Collins and Dr. Johnson, whose points of view Hester Piozzi frequently cites but with whom she does not hesitate to disagree. Obviously, she considers Dr. Johnson an authority, mentioning him many times. In his *Dictionary* Johnson wanted to improve the elegance of the language and she agrees with him when she states that synonymy “has more to do with elegance than with truth” but sometimes she dares to oppose him to support her statements. In both excerpts 5 and 6 she clearly demarcates her role by employing self-mention devices - “yet I see no reason for it”, “I have before me” and “my own idea” and the stance adverbs “unjustly” pushing the reader to agree with her, reinforced by the personal pronoun “we”, an explicit discursal marker which appeals to shared knowledge. In this way Piozzi is trying to build solidarity with her reader moving the focus of the discourse away from her to give the reader a more active role. But the presence of epistemic linguistic elements such as “probably”, “may possible”, “may be found” make the message appear more as a personal opinion rather than an accredited fact.

Excerpt 5

Mr. ADDISON has been censured, and not unjustly, for giving the two first epithets to his angel –

Calm and serene he drives the furious blast –

because, says the critick, those words being synonymous, the poet has in this too much celebrated simile been guilty of unpardonable tautology – yet are the words merely misapplied, or rather applied unluckily than ill – for if in far inferior verses you should read that –

When CALM the winds, SERENE the sky, Our thoughts enjoy TRANQUILLITY: Thro' the STILL hours when PEACEFUL night Does man to QUIET rest invite –

we should discover in these lines, however flat and insipid, no glaring fault of the same kind, although their brevity brings all the accessory words crowding together. Perhaps indeed as adverbs they may have a closer affinity – yet I see no reason for it; to use them as adjectives seems the more obvious sense, and then they harmonize well enough (*BS*, vol. 1: 84-85).

Excerpt 6

[...] I have before me the definition of FONDNESS, given into my hands many years ago by a most eminent logician, though Dr. Johnson never did acquiesce in it. “FONDNESS,” says the Definer [...]. “FONDNESS,” said Dr. Johnson [...]. Both these definitions may possibly be included in FONDNESS; my own idea of the whole may be found in the following example [...] (*BS*, vol. 1: 19).

Since her work is a mixture of facts and personal opinions without scientific rigour, we could say that she “exploits” the popularity and the notorious authority of the scholars of her time to add value to her book but often she firmly expresses her ideas through the use of personal asides such as the verbs “I think, I believe, I hope, I reckon” (for example see excerpt 2) or attitude markers such as adjectives to qualify the synonyms “agreeable substantives, gloomy synonyms, delightful, elegant, airy synonyms” expressing her emotional attitude towards them.

Synonyms are often explained through contrastive pairs men/women, native/foreigner, upper/low class, vulgar speakers/polite speakers and comparative instances between British and French culture, or British and Italian culture. Piozzi’s conversational style is also patent in the frequent uses of colloquial expressions (criticized by Johnson) such as exclamation and question marks (see excerpt 6), fillers (for example “say we”, “God knows”) or when at the end of some sections she concludes abruptly with expressions such as “but enough, and too much”, “Enough upon this subject”, “But enough, and too much, concerning this synonymy”, “But too much of these gloomy synonyms; pass we to ...”, “Enough of this

nonsense” (*BS*, vol. 1: 181, vol. 2: 375, vol.: 181, vol. 1: 185, vol. 1: 241). The conversational rhetorical style is obviously strongly characterized by the use of the pronouns “I” and “you”. She often addresses the reader/foreigner directly reducing the sense of distance from the writer, for instance:

[...] Let not my foreign readers, however, hastily condemn the word acute, and say I taught them so... (*BS*, vol. 1: 15).

[...] my foreign readers must be careful not to dignify a STICK or faggot lighted in a farmer’s chimney by the name of FIREBRAND... (*BS*, vol. 1: 67).

The presence of the modal of obligation “must” contributes to engaging Piozzi to the reader, since she instructs him/her how to use the words mentioned. Through the vehicle of familiar talk and in the context of regulating domestic conversation Hester Piozzi finds ways to hint at contemporary topics such as politics, religion and important issues such as freedom for blacks (see excerpt 7) and even anorexia (see excerpt 8).

Excerpt 7

THESE words, though all productive of the most pleasing ideas, are not for that reason strictly synonymous: the third particularly implies the power of doing an act with our own hands, and must shortly become useless; for who can MANUMIT when servitude shall be no more? When the human soul however is SET FREE from all corporeal temptations, by the dissolution of that body which contains it, how will theirs rejoice that have from pure motives, from honest and generous principles, contributed towards EMANCIPATING the Blacks, and DELIVERING them FROM SLAVERY! How much more still will those have reason to rejoice that never abused authority and power, while such precious jewels were committed to their charge! or helped to bring forward this extraordinary yet apparently half necessary disposition in the world to close up every breach of distinction, and tear away the boundaries ‘twixt man and man; those once sacred limits, long prescribed by society; and permitted if not actually appointed by Heaven, as guardians of civilized life! (*BS*, vol. 1: 193-194).

Dialogic involvement is often expressed by questions especially when the author deals with contemporary issues. In this way, questions and

exclamation clauses are aimed to arouse interest in the reader. By explaining the meaning of the word “imagination” through anorexia, the author maybe desires to encourage the reader to pay attention to a complex issue and as a conversational partner to share her thoughts.

Excerpt 8

[...] patients laboring under [...] confirmed anorexia – who find themselves subjected by those disorders to the force of IMAGINATION in such a manner as to create in them new and unaccountable FANCIES for food, rejected by persons in perfect health, as odious and offensive: – green fruit, raw vegetables of the table, even mineral substances – as clay, chalk, coals, and the like, which soon as the complaint is removed are driven away, and probably return no more (*BS*, vol. 1: 223).

Surprisingly for her time, she seems to be sensitive to this topic and in the entry “fat, fleshy, plump, well-fed” she does not encourage strict diets when she states: “a folly often committed by young ladies, who, to prevent their being called FAT, ruin their health and beauty too, which best consists in PLUMPNESS – and which when once lost can never be restored” (*BS*, vol. 1: 232).

5. *Conclusions*

This paper has considered Piozzi’s *British Synonymy* focusing on the discourse and rhetorical strategies employed by the writer to create proximity with her reader. The book, meant to be colloquial, as we have proved, is an example of ordinary spontaneous conversation, which is typified by subjective experience and interpersonal involvement.

By using a framework of Discourse Analysis, this research has underscored the dialogic and interpersonal nature of the work. Findings demonstrate that Piozzi’s writing can be considered a new “speech-related written genre” (Culpeper / Kytö 2010: 2) since it is a written text intermingled with features typical of conversation. The writer uses a descriptive, narrative and emotional language which is expressed by the use of different discourse features such as anecdotes, examples, reported speech, colloquial expressions. The interrelationship between the writer and the reader is constantly made explicit. Discourse and rhetorical

resources seem to be used to construct and negotiate social interaction. The reader does not get the impression he/she is reading a synonymy book but he/she inductively learns the meanings of the words and how to use them in conversation, which could in a sense remind us of our modern inductive methodology to teach a foreign language within a pragmatic framework.

British Synonymy can be a source of much investigation from linguistic, semantic and pragmatic perspectives. The next step of our research is to do a comparison between *British Synonymy* and other coeval texts on the basis of Corpus Linguistics Analysis methodology. As Piozzi repeats a conventional female apology for intruding on male lexicographical prerogative, a comparison analysis could allow us to verify whether she really confines her book to the domestic sphere reserved to women. Doesn't she challenge a field which was a masculine preserve? Doesn't *British Synonymy* become a propaganda instrument to express her views on contemporary topics such as politics and economy?

A conversational style and stance and engagement options bring Piozzi and her readers into the book as active participants in an unfolding dialogue. We like to imagine Piozzi undertaking a sort of dialogue also with Gabriel Girard. He defines his *La Justesse de la langue française* "ce petit ouvrage" and Hester answers defining her work "my little book".

The ways language is used offers patterns of effective persuasion to engage readers and convince them of her book reliability. She sounds optimistic about her production, she accepts the negative reviews and reacts to her critics asserting that "the first thing for a book is to be read, the second to be praised, the third to be criticized – but the irremediable misfortune is – to be forgotten" and again "I think my [works] have been, upon the whole, exceedingly well liked, and much read" (BS, vol. 1: 323).

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