On Attributive Discourse in *Madame Bovary*

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The study of attributive discourse in narrative—the "he said," "she said," "he asked," "she replied" that explicitly indicate who is speaking and can even tell us why, when, where, or how—has been relatively neglected. Apart from writers of how-to books, Tom Swift fans, and a few novelists like Nathalie Sarraute, students of narrative have, to my knowledge, rarely commented on these clauses or parts of clauses; and, in an age where studies of sign systems abound, no one has even begun to attempt a semiotics of attributive discourse. Yet, of all the signs that may be found in narrative, attributive ones are perhaps the easiest to isolate. Besides, they create countless problems for countless narrators (should I underline their function? should I use them sparingly? should I try to do without them?); they can help define a class of writings (the dime novel, for instance) or a literary period (they are, after all, "a symbol of the ancien régime"); and they can partly characterize the style of a given author or work. I should therefore like to sketch some of the paths that a study of attributive discourse might follow.

An attributive clause may or may not accompany a stretch of direct discourse:

(1) "I am sick and tired of all this!"

(2) He replied: "I am sick and tired of all this!"

When it does, it may precede that stretch of discourse, as in (2), or follow it, or be intercalated in it:

(3) "I am sick and tired of all this!" he replied.

(4) "I am," he replied, "sick and tired of all this!"

Furthermore, it may mention not only who is doing the speaking and what the latter represents (a reply, a retort, a remark, an exclamation, an objection) but also who is being addressed, for what reasons, in what circumstances, and so on:

(5) "Abandoned friends are often old," he told her when he saw her again, visibly enchanted with his observation.
John, who wanted to minimize the consequences, replied good-naturedly to Mary: “Ah, my dear, there is no harm!”

Finally, it may play one or more roles. Attributive discourse clearly functions as an aid to legibility by identifying various passages as spoken by a character, pointing out who the speaker is, and commenting on the nature of the acts of speaking performed. But it can also function as a characterization device (a character who always shouts differs from one who always whispers; a character who never asks differs from one who never answers); it can reinforce a theme (repeated indications of stammering and stuttering may, for example, call for a thematic organization around the deficiencies of oral communication); it can become a marker of point of view; it can underline ironic intentions; it can help establish a rhythm; it can (partially) describe a setting; and so forth. Studying the nature of attributive discourse in a given narrative (or set of narratives) would thus require answering such questions as: When, where, and how often does it occur? What distributional pattern(s) does it follow? What forms does it take? What information does it carry? What functions does it fulfill? More particularly, it would require examining, among other factors, the class of speakers signified by attributive discourse as well as the nature of the signifiers; the class of verbs and tenses occurring in it; the relationships among speakers, verbs, and tenses; the kind of information provided; the possible connections between attributive and direct discourse; and, obviously, the significance of these various factors within the system of the work.

Let us consider Madame Bovary. Although the “first modern French novel” has been very much studied and very well indeed; although it is animated throughout by a reflection on language, as Naomi Schor, for one, has recently demonstrated in a brilliant essay; and although its dialogue has given rise to an intelligent and patient commentary by Claudine Gothot-Mersch, its attributive discourse seems to have escaped the attention of critics. Yet Flaubert himself not only expressed his dislike for writing dialogue (“Tu sais ... la haine que j'ai du dialogue dans les romans,” “Mais comment faire du dialogue trivial qui soit bien écrit?”), “Que ma Bovary m'embête! ... Je n'ai jamais de ma vie rien écrit de plus difficile que ce que je fais maintenant, du dialogue trivial! ... J'en ai envie de pleurer par moments, tant je sens mon impuissance”); he also commented specifically on the difficulties occasioned by attributive discourse: “comme je trouve très canaille de faire du dialogue en remplaçant les ‘il dit, il répondit’ par des barres, tu juges que les répétitions des mêmes tournures ne sont pas commodes à éviter. Te voilà initiée au supplice que je subis depuis quinze jours.” Indeed, for a writer who—like Reader's Digest devotees!—was fascinated by word power and who spent years polishing his style and using incredible cunning for the composition of the simplest sentences, attributive discourse must have constituted an intolerable problem.
I have counted 1,262 instances of direct discourse in *Madame Bovary*, of which 879—around 70 percent—are accompanied by an attributive clause. Whatever distaste Flaubert may feel for the elision of such clauses, he is thus able to overcome it quite frequently. In fact, he overcomes it more and more as the novel deploys itself, dialogue grows in importance, and the characters' preoccupations become more readily identifiable: there is about 13 percent elision in the first part of the novel, 25 percent in the second part, and 28 percent in the third. The seven characters who are usually considered to be the most important—Emma, Charles, Léon, Rodolphe, Homais, Bournisien, and Lheureux—account for 1,033 of the 1,262 direct discourses, of which 724 (around 70 percent again) are underlined by attributive clauses. It is the latter that I intend to concentrate on and begin to analyze.

As could be expected, Emma is the most frequent contributor of direct discourse and the subject most often designated by an attributive clause, followed—in both categories—by Homais, Charles, Rodolphe, Léon, Lheureux, and Bournisien. But whereas the heroine, like her husband and her two lovers, is explicitly identified as speaker about 70 percent of the time, the pharmacist and the priest are identified about 75 percent of the time, and the merchant only 60 percent of the time. These discrepancies are perhaps not unexplainable. Attributive discourse institutes a distance between a character's utterance and the reader, since the narrator's mediation is more clearly in evidence; furthermore, it is less needed as an aid to legibility in cases of sustained dialogue. Homais and Bournisien are less frequently engaged in true dialogue than the other protagonists and are often shown to be mere talking puppets. On the other hand, Lheureux is mainly heard in the scenes where he crushes Emma, and his power over her is emphasized by the narrator's (relative) absence.

Although Emma is the one most often designated by attributive discourse, the range of designations is quite limited. There are over 35 signifiers of the heroine in the novel, but only 7 of them appear as subjects of attributive clauses. "Elle" is the overwhelming choice—198 instances out of 272—followed by "Emma." The other 5—"Mme Bovary," "la jeune femme," "la bru," "sa mère," and "celle-ci"—are used 10 times in all. The heroine never speaks directly as a bride, a wife, a mistress, or a neighbor and, in general, barely speaks as a social creature. Symptomatically, her utterances are almost always the product of a first name or a personal pronoun, whereas the title of the novel as well as her situation underline the importance of social forces. At the other extreme, Homais, Lheureux, and Bournisien are practically always designated in terms of their profession—"l'apothicaire," "le pharmacien," "le marchand," "le prêtre," "le curé," "l'ecclésiastique"—or by their last name, by such passepartout appellations as "le bonhomme," "l'un" and "l'autre," and by the pronoun "il." They have no first names, and their direct discourse is
a manifestation of social discourse. Homais's case is particularly clear because he is designated by "il" only 30 times out of 121: little that is personal is consistently attached to him—not even a pronoun.

But there are further questions to raise with regard to the subjects of attributive clauses. What dictates the choice of one signifier over another? Why does Flaubert sometimes write "Charles," sometimes "Bovary," and sometimes "le médecin"? Why does he use, at certain points, "Léon" as opposed to "le clerc" or "le jeune homme"? It is not merely in order to avoid a repetition, since there are many instances where none of the signifiers would entail one. Nor is it always a matter of rhythm or harmony: indeed, in certain cases, the signifier used is not necessarily the most euphonious. Rather, in Madame Bovary the subjects of attributive clauses often function as point-of-view indicators. The heroïne and her husband meet Léon at the opera house, and the young man suggests going to a café: "'Ah! pas encore! restons!' dit Bovary. 'Elle a les cheveux dénoués: cela promet d'ètre tragique'" (p. 233). For whom is the husband "Bovary"? It is clearly not for his wife; nor is it (only) for the narrator. We are made to see in terms of Léon and perhaps of Charles himself. For the young man, the husband is "Bovary" and not "Charles," and the latter, in Léon's presence, views himself through a last name. Similarly, in a passage representing Emma and her daughter, Flaubert writes: "'Amenez-la-moi!' dit sa mère, se précipitant pour l'embrasser. 'Comme je t'aime, ma pauvre enfant! comme je t'aime!'" (p. 178). Playing at being a mother (and seen as one by Berthe), Emma sees herself as such. Attributive discourse in Madame Bovary is characteristically ambivalent: the narrator comments on the characters' verbal acts and is thus at a certain distance from them, but his remarks are partly shaped by the characters' consciousness.

Like the subjects of attributive clauses, the verbs contribute to characterization. All of the main actors say, answer, go on ("reprendre"), ejaculate ("faire"), retort ("répliquer"), and add; but "penser" and "songer" are never associated with Homais and Bournisien, though they accompany some of the utterances of the other five characters. Only the pharmacist thunders ("tonner"); Lheureux alone does not cry out ("s'écrier") or exclaim, and he does not sigh or whisper either; as for Emma and Charles, they are the only ones to stammer ("balbutier"), and she is unique in that she hesitates. Not unexpectedly, Homais's range is the widest: 22 different verbs appear in the clauses tagged on to his words. Charles is a surprising second with 21, and Emma only comes in third with 20. More significantly perhaps, in terms of number of verbs per number of attributive clauses, Emma proves to be the most limited by far, and she is followed by Homais: the more one speaks, the more one's verbal limitations tend to manifest themselves.

Sometimes the verbs used underline a character's feelings in a particular situation. Charles tells Emma that a colleague humiliated him in public, and
Flaubert writes: "elle était exaspérée de honte, elle avait envie de le battre, elle alla dans le corridor ouvrir la fenêtre et huma l'air frais pour se calmer. 'Quel pauvre homme! quel pauvre homme!' disait-elle tout bas" (p. 63). The novelist chose "dire tout bas" over "se dire": Emma can no longer prevent herself from expressing her scorn.\textsuperscript{16}

More generally, however, the verbs are not very revealing. Flaubert relies heavily on "dire": that most neutral of tags appears in 325 attributive clauses, that is, in well over a third of the total. Furthermore, he uses only 44 different main verbs,\textsuperscript{17} which is not very many when we think of his passion for lexical diversity, when we consider that he does not always avoid repetition (e.g., pp. 95, 108, 123), and when we note that he never uses such items as "affirmer," "remarquer," "insister," "admettre," and "a whole dictionaryful besides." Finally, and repeatedly, Flaubert opts for the muted rather than the expressive. To report the last words of Charles's first wife, he merely writes: "elle dit: 'Ah! mon Dieu'" (p. 21); the three verbal exchanges that bind Emma to Charles, Léon, and Rodolphe, respectively, are accompanied by the same pair of banal clauses: "demanda-t-elle?"/"répondit-il" (pp. 17, 84, 147); and when Emma gives birth, the description of her husband's verbal reaction is equally insipid: "'C'est une fille!' dit Charles" (p. 91). Language is inadequate: "la parole humaine est comme un chaudron fêlé où nous battons des mélodies à faire danser les ours quand on voudrait attendrir les étoiles" (p. 196); and the attributive clauses underline this inadequacy. The words uttered and the surface act constituted by their utterance are not important in themselves. Conversation is not meaningful; \textit{sous-conversation} is.

Indeed, although Flaubert enjoyed a well-developed auditory imagination,\textsuperscript{18} although references to sound are quite numerous in \textit{Madame Bovary}, and although 362 of the attributive clauses (about 41 percent) contain more than a subject and verb—a prepositional phrase, say, or an adverbial one—fewer than 30 of them explicitly mention the characters' voices. Like the words uttered, voice recedes into the background.

Flaubert's bias becomes even clearer when we examine the tenses in attributive discourse: as many as 175 of the (main) verbs—about 20 percent—are in the imperfect and not, as would be expected, in the simple past. The imperfect is perhaps used to emphasized the length of certain utterances—one of Homais's orations, for example—or to point out that the words uttered are characteristic,\textsuperscript{19} or to satisfy an inordinate taste for rhythmical prose. Yet, because it is a marker of process and repetition, its frequent occurrence has other consequences. When the imperfect is used duratively, part of the event reported has already happened and part of it is still to come: what a character says is presumably not given in its entirety; and when the imperfect is used iteratively, a similar conclusion can be reached. Flaubert's reliance on the imperfect thus indicates the relative lack of importance and the dispensability
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of what is actually said. More generally and more significantly, I think, it undermines the difference between showing and telling, dramatic and descriptive, recording of the oral and inscription of the nonoral: what we are given is often not a true scene; what we are made to witness is not the action as it occurred; what we are made to hear is not the utterance itself.

In the final analysis, and rather than the capacity to function on many levels or the art with which it punctuates the characters' speech acts, what makes attributive discourse in Madame Bovary most interesting is this (partial) rejection of the oral. Like free indirect discourse, ironic distancing, and constant point-of-view modulation, attributive discourse leads to the appearance of an uncertain space.

1. I will not consider as part of attributive discourse clauses or sentences that implicitly introduce a character's utterance, as in the following: "He smiled. 'How are you?' She put the cup on the table. 'I am fine!'" On the other hand, though I will use "speaker" or "utterance" for the sake of convenience, I shall consider such clauses as "he thought" in a sentence like: "'She is very nice,' he thought."

2. See Marc Angenot, Le Roman populaire: Recherches en paralitterature (Montreal: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1975), p. 120.


4. For instance, to describe how a character says what he says, Arnold Bennett uses such adverbs as affectionately, angrily, blandly, briefly, calmly, carelessly, coldly, contemptuously, crossly, curtly, doubtfully, eagerly, earnestly, emphatically, enthusiastically, faintly, fiercely, foolishly, formally, gravely, grimly, gruffly, hopefully, imperturbably, jauntily, kindly, laconically, lamely, loudly, maternally, menacingly, mildly, naively, obsequiously, pleasantly, positively, proudly, quietly, savagely, scornfully, self-consciously, sharply, sincerely, sleepily, slowly, solemnly, stiffly, timidly, wearily, wildly, and willingly.

5. Gustave Flaubert, Madame Bovary (Paris: Garnier, 1971). All references will be to this edition.


10. "La phrase la plus simple comme 'il ferma la porte', 'il sortit', etc., exige des ruses d'art incroyables!" (ibid., 4: 36).

11. Dialogue is not as sparse as has sometimes been claimed. Indeed, it becomes a dominant form in the third part of the novel.

12. There are 6 elisions per 46 utterances in the first part, 165 per 655 in the second, and 212 per 561 in the third.

13. Note that Emma is also the most frequent addressee of direct discourse. She speaks less often than she is spoken to and so does Léon. On the other hand, both Homais and Lheureux speak much more often than they are spoken to. Charles, Rodolphe, and Bournisien are addressers about as frequently as they are addressees. See Appendix.
14. Homais is designated once as “son mari” (p. 172).
15. See Appendix.
17. See Appendix.

**APPENDIX**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characters</th>
<th>Utterances</th>
<th>Appearances in Attributive Clauses</th>
<th>Addressees of Direct Discourse</th>
<th>Attributive Discourse Verbs</th>
<th>Attributive Clauses per Verb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>437</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homais</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodolphe</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Léon</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lheureux</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bournisien</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Main Verbs in Attributive Sentences**

- ajouter
- appeler
- balbutier
- bourdonner (?)
- chanter (?)
- chuchoter
- commencer
- concéder
- continuer
- crier
- déclamer
- demander
- dire
- s’écrier
- exclamer
- s’exclamer
- faire
- faire des exclamations
- grommeler
- hasarder
- hésiter
- interrompre

- juger
- laisser tomber (des mots)
- lire (à haute voix) (?)
- ne pas manquer une plaisanterie
- marmotter
- murmurer
- objecter
- observer
- penser
- poursuivre
- prendre la défense de
- prononcer
- recommencer
- répéter
- repliquer
- répondre
- reprendre
- ne pas retenir une phrase
- souffler
- soupirer
- tonner