Empathic, immersive, and aesthetic processes in prose and poetry reception: a neurocognitive poetics perspective

Arthur Jacobs (Freie Universität Berlin), öffentlicher Abendvortrag am 28.03.2017, 18.15 Uhr, Konferenzraum 0.101 GSGG, Friedländer Weg 2

When scanning a phone book for a number, reflecting upon the first lines of Finegan's Wake, getting lost in a passage from Harry Potter, or being enchanted by a verse from a Shakespeare sonnet, readers can experience a wealth of feelings that are shaped by an even bigger affluence of factors, such as reading perspective and motivation, textual qualities and task demands, or personality and context. In this talk, I will use a comprehensive model of literary reading, the neurocognitive poetics model (NCPM; Jacobs, 2011; 2015), to derive hypotheses about possible effects of these factors on two theoretically rival processes, immersive and aesthetic ones. Results from neurocognitive and behavioral studies of both prose and poetry reception will be discussed in the light of these hypotheses with a special look on the role of empathy and fiction feelings. With regard to prose, the fiction feeling hypothesis of the NCPM will be examined, i.e. the assumption that narratives with emotional contents invite readers more to be empathic with the protagonists and thus engage the affective empathy networks of the brain, than do stories with neutral contents. As concerns poetry, the mood empathy hypothesis (Jacobs et al., 2016; Lüdtke et al., 2014) will be scrutinized, according to which poems expressing moods of persons, or situations should engage readers to mentally simulate and affectively resonate with the depicted state of affairs. The data collected so far using materials from the Black Stories, Harrry Potter, ETA Hoffmann's The Sandman, and a collection of German poems from authors such as Hölderlin, Rilke, Ausländer, or Grünbein, support both hypotheses and strengthen the NCPM's basic dual-route architecture opposing a fluent and a dysfluent reading mode driven by different text features and their implicit vs. explicit processing, i.e. background and foreground elements and immersive vs. aesthetic feelings.