Reporting Verbs as a Stylistic Device in the Creation of Fictional Personalities in Literary Texts

Abstract

This article presents an analysis of how reporting verbs can contribute to the creation of fictional personalities in literary texts. The examination of verbs was carried out using Caldas-Coulthard’s taxonomy, in which verbs are classified in self-contained categories according to the reporter’s level of mediation on the words glossed. The examples under analysis have all been taken from Charles Dickens’s *Nicholas Nickleby*; for the sake of consistency, I focused on one character —Ralph Nickleby, whose words are reported using twenty-six verbs a total of 501 times throughout the story. As will be shown, Dickens’s choice of verbs projects a specific way of speaking that triggers information about the villain’s personality, thereby contributing to shaping his well-known evil character. The analysis will also illustrate how reporting verbs can influence the way in which readers form an impression of characters on the basis of their ways of speaking during the course of a story.

Keywords: reporting verbs; fictional personalities; characterization; Dickens; *Nicholas Nickleby*; Ralph Nickleby

Los verbos de habla como recurso estilístico en la caracterización de personajes en textos literarios

Resumen

En este artículo se analiza cómo los verbos de habla pueden contribuir a la caracterización de los personajes en textos literarios. Para ello se ha utilizado la clasificación de Caldas-Coulthard, en la que los verbos se organizan en diferentes categorías según su nivel de interferencia sobre el discurso referido. Los ejemplos analizados pertenecen a *Nicholas Nickleby*, de Charles Dickens. Por razones de consistencia, el estudio se ha centrado en un solo personaje: Ralph Nickleby, con quien Dickens emplea veintiséis verbos un total de 501 veces a lo largo de la historia. Como se podrá comprobar, la elección que Dickens hace de los verbos contribuye a proyectar el rol de villano de este personaje a través de un habla muy específica. El análisis servirá, asimismo, para ilustrar cómo los verbos de habla influyen en la impresión que el lector se forma de los personajes en el transcurso de la historia a través de sus formas de hablar.

Palabras clave: verbos de habla; personajes literarios; caracterización; Dickens; *Nicholas Nickleby*; Ralph Nickleby

1. Introduction

In this article, I analyse how reporting verbs can contribute to the creation of fictional personalities in literary texts. It is commonly stated that reporting verbs, both in and beyond fiction, not only have a linguistic function, but also evaluate the discourse being reported (Zwicky, 1971; Verscheuren, 1980; Rudzka-Ostyn, 1988; Levin, 1993; Caldas-Coulthard, 1994; Klamer, 2000; Kissine, 2010; Urban and Ruppenhofer, 2001, among others). In the case of fictional narratives, reporting verbs can be therefore a powerful device for characterisation. Unfortunately, the interpretative value of reporting verbs tends to be discussed only with regard to those specific verbs that reveal information related to the “affective meaning” (Leech, 1974: 14) of the utterance —the meaning contributed by features that reveal the feelings and attitudes of the speaker. Naturally, the potential of those verbs (*growl*, *thunder*, *whimper*, etc.) is not disputed, as they refer to “aspects of speech that contribute to the meaning over and above what the verbal element of the message means” (Brown, 1990: 112). However, seemingly more neutral choices can also be meaningful for the purposes of shaping the identities of fictional characters. For example, a character may systematically *answer* in a particular way (see section 4.2), or he or she may constantly *interrupt* (see section 4.4). This article analyses different types of verbs, from those that reveal characters’ attitudes to those that appear merely to refer to the process of interaction. As will be shown, the cumulative effect created by the use of all these verbs can contribute to the portrayal of fictional characters.

The examination of verbs was carried out using Caldas-Coulthard’s (1987) taxonomy, which classifies verbs into five self-contained categories according to the reporter’s level of mediation on the words glossed. The examples under analysis have all been taken from Charles Dickens’s *Nicholas Nickleby*. For the sake of consistency, I concentrated on one character: Ralph Nickleby, whose words are reported by Dickens through the use of twenty-six different verbs a total of 501 times throughout the story.[[1]](#footnote-1) Although the principal aim of this analysis is to demonstrate the characterising potential of reporting verbs, it will also contribute to a better understanding of Dickens’s craftsmanship from a stylistic perspective. As the analysis of the speech verbs used to report Ralph’s words will demonstrate, the well-known turns of speech and habitual gestures of Dickens’s characters are not isolated characterising features, but part of a wide range of textual functions “presented more subtly and integrated into the wider picture of the fictional world” (Mahlberg, 2013: 165).

The article begins with a brief overview of reporting verbs and their characterising potential, focusing on Caldas-Coulthard’s (1987) taxonomy (section 2). This is followed by a brief discussion on the studies of Charles Dickens’s use of reporting verbs (section 3). In addition, the catalogue of verbs used in *Nicholas Nickleby* and also those associated to Ralph are shown (section 3.1). These verbs are analysed in section 4, which is divided into five sub-sections in accordance with the categories proposed by Caldas-Coulthard (1987). The article concludes with some remarks about the potential of reporting verbs and suggests further possible areas of research on reporting verbs.

2. Reporting Verbs in Fictional Narratives

Speech presentation is one of the pillars of fictional narratives (Bray, 2014: 222). One of the many functions fulfilled by the reporting of characters’ words is, of course, that of characterisation: speech may become both “a badge of identity and a means of enriching the reader’s awareness of a given character’s individuality” (Page, 1973: 15). Such individuality, however, is the result not only of what characters say, but also of how they say it. As Culpeper (2001: 215) states in his model of characterisation in literary texts, “the way one speaks can trigger information about […] personality,” thereby contributing decisively to the portrayal of characters. Representing fictional characters’ ways of speaking, however, is not easy, as the written medium limits the representation of such things as clarity in pronunciation, tone, loudness, nasality, pitch or singing (Brüngel-Dittrich, 2005: 30). These aspects, which may significantly influence the shaping of a character’s voice, and therefore his or her characterisation, are frequently compensated for by the use of reporting verbs. This study will show that this is where the potential of reporting verbs in the creation of fictional personalities lies.

As noted in the introduction, this article sets out to demonstrate that various types of reporting verbs can potentially be meaningful in terms of characterisation. That is to say, less specific verbs, which appear to be more neutral, may also contribute to shaping characters’ personalities. In order to briefly contextualise the potential significance of every verb, two interdependent aspects must be emphasised: the finite nature of the text and the lack of neutrality in fictional narratives. The finite nature of the text with which the potential of reporting verbs is connected is best reflected in Page’s (1973: 2) assertion that “detail in a work of fiction, whether of action, description or speech, and however apparently fortuitous or excessive, can hardly be dismissed as irrelevant, since it belongs to the strictly finite amount of material laid at our disposal by the writer, as distinct from the unselective and virtually unlimited offering made by ‘reality’.” Since we form mental impressions of characters on the basis of limited information (Mahlberg, 2013: 119), any description of how they speak is likely to carry a “certain weight of significance” (Page, 1973: 2), if only because it is a choice deliberately made by the author. The significance of these descriptions is closely connected to the aforementioned lack of neutrality of fictional narratives, even when this is the impression that the author wants to convey. Thus, a lack of narratorial intervention when reporting characters’ words —for instance, through the use of neutral verbs or by using strategies such as free direct speech, in which the reporting clause is omitted (Semino and Short 2004: 10)— is but an illusion, since narrators are “in charge of selecting, ordering and organizing the sequence in which events will be recounted. There is always a choice and a construction” (Caldas-Coulthard, 1988: 23). Needless to say, interpretative verbs are more significant, especially considering that authors frequently exaggerate features of real interaction through the use of specific verbs in order to amplify speech features (Caldas-Coulthard, 1988: 62). Thus, readers’ assignment of a speech act introduced by *beg* or *implore* will be completely different from one introduced by *bellow* or *vociferate*, for example. However, seemingly more neutral choices can be equally meaningful, even if the effect is less conspicuous. A systematic use of *reply* may reflect a character’s passive role, *suggest* might indicate politeness and *hesitate* can be an effective means of projecting insecurity, to name just a few examples.

In order to analyse the characterising potential of reporting verbs, Caldas-Coulthard’s (1987) taxonomy was used. Unlike other well-known classifications of reporting verbs (Wierzbicka, 1987; Levin, 1993; Brüngel-Dittrich, 2005), Caldas-Coulthard’s taxonomy classifies verbs according to the reporter’s level of interference on the words being reported; this is very convenient in this instance, as it enables us to measure the meaningfulness of different verbs in the creation of the fictional personalities discussed here. She classifies verbs into five self-contained categories: neutral, structuring, illocutionary, discourse signalling and descriptive verbs. These categories are discussed below. [[2]](#footnote-2)

*Neutral verbs*

As can be observed in (1), neutral verbs (*say* and *tell* in English) are interpretatively empty, as they “simply signal de illocutionary act —the saying; the intended meaning (illocutionary force) has to be derived from the dialogue itself” (Caldas-Coulthard, 1987: 153). As shown in section 4.1, however, they are frequently used with glossing phrases that qualify the words reported, thereby conveying a stylistic function in terms of characterisation.

(1) ‘Look here, sir,’ *said* Ralph; ‘I’ll put this matter in its true light in two seconds.’ (Chapter 4) [[3]](#footnote-3)

*Structuring verbs*

Structuring verbs “describe the way in which a given speech act […] fits into a sequence of speech acts” (Caldas-Coulthard, 1987: 155). They signal prospection (*ask*, *question*) and retrospection (*reply*, *return*), as shown in (2) and (3) respectively. In direct speech “they are often redundant, since the representation of the exchange should be self-evident” (Caldas-Coulthard, 1988: 145). As is the case for neutral verbs, author intervention is minimal. Authors also use these verbs with glossing phrases in order to provide readers with further details about how the words are uttered. This is shown in section 4.2.

(2) ‘What does she want?’ *asked* Ralph. (Chapter 28)

(3) ‘Do it then’ *returned* Ralph, ‘and I’ll reward you. Now, you may go.’ (Chapter 51)

*Illocutionary reporting verbs*

Illocutionary reporting verbs “strongly convey the presence of the author in the text, since outside the dialogue, the reader is presented with a verb that elucidates the author’s intended illocutionary force” (Caldas-Coulthard, 1987: 156). They are divided into metalinguistic and metapropositional verbs. Metalinguistic verbs, on the one hand, simply signal a linguistic act (*quote*, *narrate*). Metapropositional verbs, on the other hand, are those which, in addition to signalling a linguistic act, also reveal “what kind of illocutionary act we are confronted with” (Caldas-Coulthard, 1987: 158). These verbs can be assertive (*agree*, *assent*), expressive (*complain*, *lament*), directive (*urge*, *order*) or commissive (*offer*, *promise*), and their use eliminates “misinterpretation on the part of the reader” (Caldas-Coulthard, 1987: 157). This is the case in (4), where the use of the verb *demand* makes the directive force of Ralph’s speech act explicit. As shown in section 4.3, illocutionary reporting verbs can have a strong characterising potential.

(4) ‘Why not, sir?’ *demanded* Mr Nickleby. (Chapter 3)

*Discourse signalling verbs*

Discourse signalling verbs mainly “guide the reader through the simulated process” (Caldas-Coulthard, 1987: 163). They may be used to refer to other parts of the discourse (*add*, *repeat*), as in (5), or they may indicate the development of the discourse (*pause*, *pursue*), as in (6). Authors resort to discourse signalling verbs “to convey ‘liveliness’ in the pseudo-interaction” (Caldas-Coulthard, 1987: 164). Such liveliness may be strategically used to project character traits, since hesitation, pauses, silences or interruptions can reflect meaningful attitudes, as shown in section 4.4.

(5) ‘And trust me, sir,’ *added* Ralph, ‘that I never supposed you would give him up tonight.’ (Chapter 45)

(6) ‘And you spent what little money you had, in coming all the way to London, to see what I could do for you?’ *pursued* Ralph. (Chapter 3)

*Descriptive verbs*

Finally, descriptive verbs “are not reporting but descriptive in relation to the pseudo-talk, since their meaning has to do with the manner of utterances rather than matter” (Caldas-Coulthard, 1987: 162). They are divided into the sub-categories of prosodic and paralinguistic verbs. Prosodic verbs (*cry*, *shout*) refer to “vocal effects constituted by variation of pitch, loudness and duration” (Caldas-Coulthard, 1987: 162), as shown in (7). Paralinguistic verbs are further divided into voice qualifier verbs and voice qualification verbs. Voice qualifier verbs (*murmur*, *mutter*) “are frequently used by authors to mark manner” (Caldas-Coulthard, 1987: 162), as shown in (8). Voice qualification verbs (*growl*, *thunder*), on the other hand, “mark *attitude* of speaker in relation to what is being said” (Caldas-Coulthard, 1987: 163), as seen in (9). Descriptive verbs are undoubtedly the most significant category in terms of characterisation, as discussed in section 4.5.

(7) ‘Hallo here. Stop!’ *cried* Ralph. ‘What’s the matter? Here am I. Didn’t you hear me knock?’ (Chapter 44)

(8) ‘Reasonable, certainly!’ *muttered* Mr Nickleby to himself, as he walked on, ‘very reasonable!’ (Chapter 3)

(9) ‘And your fare down, I have paid,’ *growled* Ralph. ‘So, you’ll have nothing to do but keep yourself warm.’ (Chapter 4)

Verbs from these five categories convey different levels of mediation on the words reported, from an apparent lack of interference (neutral or structuring verbs) to a high degree of direct intervention (descriptive verbs). Nevertheless, any verb, however neutral it may seem, can contribute to the creation of fictional personalities. This is demonstrated in section 4 through the example of Ralph Nickleby. Before analysing the projection of his villain’s speech, however, let us briefly discuss the reasons for choosing to analyse Charles Dickens and his relevance to the analysis of reporting verbs in literary texts from a stylistic point view.

3. Charles Dickens

There are two reasons for choosing Dickens for the purpose of this analysis. First and foremost, one of the most widely discussed aspects of his well-known techniques of characterisation is the individualisation of his characters’ speeches. Indeed, he provides the reader with “fairly frequent descriptions of the way in which characters speak” (Brook, 1970: 39), thereby making speech “an integral part of the personality of each character and a part which we recognize each time he or she appears” (Quirk, 1961: 21). Therefore, Dickensian characters seem a fertile soil on which to analyse the potential of reporting verbs for the creation of fictional personalities in literary texts. Secondly, and despite the numerous detailed analyses about his characters’ ways of speaking, the projection of his characters’ voices through reporting verbs is still underexplored. With the exception of a few isolated studies that mention Dickens’s use of reporting verbs in passing (Fido, 1968; Page, 1973; Lambert, 1981), traditional literary criticism has, in fact, never focused on this aspect. In his analysis of *Great Expectations*, for instance, Fido (1968: 84) notes how “Pip’s immature lack of control over his emotions is presented through his diction, his actions, and the fact that he ‘cries’, ‘exclaims’ and speaks severely or moodily, while Biddy ‘says’, and moves, as a rule, slowly and quietly.” With regard to Page (1973: 26), he states that, like many other writers, Dickens seeks “to relieve the monotony of constant ‘he-saids’ by resorting to elegant variation.” He concentrates on the opening chapter of *David Copperfield*, which “has *returned* eight times, *asked* and *cried* five times each, *exclaimed, faltered* and *resumed* twice each, and *repeated, replied, sobbed, mused* and *ejaculating* once each” (1973: 26). However, Pages does not delve deeper into the stylistic function of these choices. Finally, Lambert (1981: 8) realises that the variety of reporting verbs in Dickens’s novels is “far larger than would be needed simply to avoid monotony.” Although he acknowledges that it would be interesting to compare the proportions of different types of verbs in different novels as well as to analyse them in a particular work (1981: 16), he unfortunately goes no further than that. Therefore, this analysis of reporting verbs associated with Ralph Nickleby will also contribute to a better understanding of the way in which Charles Dickens’s constructed his characters’ speeches.

Although traditional literary criticism has paid little attention to Dickens’s use of reporting verbs, however, it is only fair to state that the use of innovative corpus-linguistic approaches has resulted in several recent studies on this subject, such as those conducted by Mahlberg, Smith and Preston (2013) and Ruano San Segundo (2016). On the one hand, Mahlberg, Smith and Preston (2013) identify and analyse patterns of seventeen different verbs in suspended reporting clauses, demonstrating that “a typology of reporting verbs can overemphasize the meaning of the verb in isolation” (Mahlberg, Smith and Preston, 2013: 52), thereby revealing significant character information. On the other hand, Ruano San Segundo (2016) uses a corpus methodology to retrieve 17,021 occurrences of 130 verbs from Dickens’s novels. Focusing on Dickens’s use of some descriptive verbs, he also explores the characterising value of reporting verbs. The present analysis of reporting verbs associated with Ralph Nickleby, which includes verbs from the five categories discussed in section 2, will build and expand on those studies. The verbs under analysis here are listed below.

3.1 Reporting verbs in Dickens’s *Nicholas Nickleby*

Of the 17,021 occurrences retrieved by Ruano San Segundo, 2,479 are from *Nicholas Nickleby* (Ruano San Segundo, 2016: 120), as shown in table 1.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Verb | Freq. | Verb | Freq. | Verb | Freq. | Verb | Freq. |
| *add* | 58 | *groan* | 2 | *remonstrate* | 10 | *sob* | 12 |
| *answer* | 46 | *growl* | 11 | *repeat* | 59 | *soliloquise* | 1 |
| *ask* | 136 | *hiccup* | 1 | *reply* | 629 | *squeak* | 1 |
| *assent* | 1 | *inquire* | 79 | *respond* | 1 | *stammer* | 3 |
| *bawl* | 7 | *interpose* | 42 | *resume* | 23 | *submit* | 1 |
| *chuckle* | 2 | *interrupt* | 32 | *retort* | 74 | *suggest* | 13 |
| *continue* | 31 | *laugh* | 5 | *return* | 226 | *thunder* | 2 |
| *cry* | 358 | *murmur* | 11 | *roar* | 4 | *titter* | 7 |
| *croak* | 1 | *mutter* | 33 | *scream* | 8 | *urge* | 21 |
| *demand* | 39 | *observe* | 68 | *shout* | 3 | *whimper* | 1 |
| *drawl* | 1 | *plead* | 1 | *shriek* | 6 | *whine* | 2 |
| *echo* | 6 | *pursue* | 19 | *sigh* | 7 | *whisper* | 21 |
| *exclaim* | 73 | *reason* | 12 | *simper* | 1 | TOTAL | 2479 |
| *expostulate* | 1 | *rejoin* | 222 | *snarl* | 5 |  |  |
| *falter* | 7 | *remark* | 24 | *sneer* | 9 |  |  |

Table 1. Reporting verbs used in *Nicholas Nickleby*

Of those 2,479 occurrences, 226 are used to report the words of Ralph Nickleby. As can be seen in table 2, those occurrences are divided into twenty-five verbs.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Verb | Freq. | Verb | Freq. | Verb | Freq. | Verb | Freq. |
| *add* | 5 | *growl* | 8 | *reason* | 2 | *return* | 22 |
| *answer* | 6 | *inquire* | 7 | *rejoin* | 18 | *snarl* | 2 |
| *ask* | 14 | *interpose* | 4 | *remark* | 1 | *sneer* | 2 |
| *continue* | 5 | *interrupt* | 7 | *repeat* | 5 | *suggest* | 1 |
| *cry* | 16 | *mutter* | 16 | *reply* | 48 | TOTAL | 226 |
| *demand* | 12 | *observe* | 4 | *resume* | 3 |  |  |
| *echo* | 1 | *pursue* | 3 | *retort* | 14 |  |  |

Table 2. Reporting verbs used to gloss Ralph Nickleby’s words

As can be seen in the table above, these twenty-five verbs include structuring verbs (*answer*, *ask*, *inquire*, *rejoin*, *reply* and *return*), illocutionary reporting verbs (*demand*, *observe*, *reason*, *remark* and *suggest*), discourse signalling verbs (*add*, *continue*, *echo*, *interpose*, *interrupt*, *pursue*, *repeat* and *resume*) and descriptive verbs (*cry*, *growl*, *mutter*, *retort*, *snarl* and *sneer*). This analysis covers all of the above-mentioned categories, as well as *say*, reporting verb par excellence that was deliberately ruled out in Ruano San Segundo (2016: 116). Specifically, 275 occurrences of the use of *say* to report Ralph’s words were identified in *Nicholas Nickleby*; when added to the catalogue of 226 occurrences of twenty-five different verbs shown in table 2, this makes a final set of 501 occurrences of twenty-six different verbs that are used to report the words of Dickens’s villain. The characterising function of this catalogue of verbs is analysed in section 4.

4. Analysis

Ralph Nickleby is the uncle of young Nicholas. He is the novel’s main villain and principal antagonist. He is a cold, manipulative usurer who finds infamous work for both Nicholas and his sister and then attempts to use them. He hangs himself after Smike is revealed as the son whom he supposed dead.[[4]](#footnote-4) As shown next, Dickens’s use of reporting verbs helps to shape his malevolent character during the course of the story. The analysis is divided into five sub-sections, each of which corresponds to one of the categories discussed in section 2, namely neutral verbs (section 4.1), structuring verbs (section 4.2), illocutionary reporting verbs (section 4.3), discourse signalling verbs (section 4.4) and descriptive verbs (section 4.5).

4. 1 Neutral Verbs

As has already been mentioned, neutral verbs —*say* in the case of the verbs used to report Ralph’s words— simply introduce reported discourse, without explicitly evaluating it. However, since neutrality in fiction is only apparent, choices that are seemingly unbiased may have significant stylistic functions. In the case of (1) shown in section 2, for instance, *said* separates the imperative “Look here, sir” from the remainder of Ralph’s speech, thus highlighting his command. Indeed, this is a way in which neutral reporting verbs are frequently used to qualify speech (Busse, 2010: 203). However, neutral verbs can also play a more conspicuous role in the creation of fictional personalities. As Caldas-Coulthard (1987: 165) asserts, an “author can gloss utterances with the reporting verb ‘say’ plus either an adverb, an adjective, or a prepositional clause which will mark either manner or attitude.” This is particularly true of Dickens, who makes use of what is perhaps the most varied grammatical realisation of *say* (Oncins-Martínez, 2011). Not only is *say* the verb that is most frequently used to report Ralph’s words, with more occurrences than all the other verbs put together (see section 3.1), it is often also used with those glossing phrases mentioned by Caldas-Coulthard. Thus, *say* is sometimes accompanied by adverbs, as in (10) and (11):

(10) ‘Call it what you like’ *said Ralph, irritably*, ‘but attend to me.’ (Chapter 56)

(11) ‘Come down, I say. Will you come down?’ *said Ralph fiercely*. (Chapter 59)

Prepositional phrases are also frequent, as in (12) and (13).

(12) ‘He has a tolerable share of everything that you lay claim to, my lord,’ *said Ralph with a sneer*. (Chapter 19)

(13) ‘You had better refresh your memory, sir,’ *said Ralph, with a threatening look*. (Chapter 51)

Finally, -*ing* clauses are also fairly common, as in (14) and (15):

(14) ‘There is something missing, you say,’ *said Ralph, shaking him furiously by the collar*. ‘What is it?’ (Chapter 56)

(15) ‘There is some of that boy’s blood in you, I see,’ *said Ralph, speaking in his harshest tones, as something in the flashing eye reminded him of Nicholas at their last meeting*. (Chapter 28)

These examples show how the adverbs, prepositional phrases and -*ing* clauses with which *say* is frequently accompanied help to project Ralph’s evil character. Sometimes, these glossing phrases add information about the tone in which the words are uttered, as in (15), thereby revealing the character’s attitude. The information is also frequently related to body language, which may also emphasise Ralph’s state of mind, as can be seen in (13) and (14). However, the most frequent examples are those in which Dickens straightforwardly refers to Ralph’s attitude. This is the case of (10), (11) and (12). Of the 275 occurrences of *say*, 145 (that is, 52.72%) contain glossing phrases. As can be seen in the examples above, many of these glossing phrases project meaningful information that contributes to the portrayal of Ralph (other glossing phrases found with *say* are: *carelessly*, *drily*, *in his harshest accents*, *irascibly*, *looking sharply at them by turns*, *looking fearfully round*, *menacing him*, *roughly enough*, *scowling round*, *tartly*, *testily* or *with great testiness*, among others). It therefore seems clear that theoretically unbiased choices like *say* can contribute to projecting significant character traits, especially when they are used strategically with interpretative glossing phrases.

4. 2 Structuring Verbs

Secondly, structuring verbs are slightly more specific than neutral verbs. Even though they do not evaluate the words explicitly, they indicate prospection (*ask*) and retrospection (*answer*), which may reinforce the portrayal of a character in a story. For instance, the active role of an inquiring character may be enhanced by the frequent use of verbs indicating prospection (*ask*, *question*, *inquire*), whereas a passive role may be illustrated through the repeated use of verbs indicating retrospection (*answer*, *respond*, *reply*). However, the significance of these verbs for the creation of personalities is best reflected when, like *say*, they are used with interpretative glossing phrases. Let us take *reply*, *return* and *rejoin* as examples. After *say*, these are the verbs that are most frequently used to report Ralph’s discourse, with forty-seven, twenty-two and eighteen occurrences respectively (see table 2). Of the eighty-seven occurrences of these three verbs, forty (45.97%) are also accompanied by glossing phrases. As is the case with *say*, some of these phrases are adverbs that reveal Ralph’s attitude, as shown in examples (16) and (17).

(16) ‘We are alone,’ *returned Ralph, tartly*. ‘What do you want with me?’ (Chapter 34)

(17) ‘I think you had better,’ *rejoined Ralph, drily*. (Chapter 47)

Interpretative prepositional phrases are also common, as can be seen in (18) and (19).

(18) ‘I see,’ *rejoined Ralph, with the same steady gaze*. ‘Bad, indeed! I should not have known you, Sir Mulberry. Dear, dear! This IS bad.’ (Chapter 38)

(19) ‘No,’ *replied Ralph, with equal abruptness*. (Chapter 34)

There are also several occurrences of -*ing* clauses, as shown in (20) and (21).

(20) ‘Ay,’ *replied Ralph, turning upon him with an angry look*. ‘Help me on with this spencer, and don’t repeat after me, like a croaking parrot.’ (Chapter 44)

(21) ‘No,’ *returned Ralph, bending a severe look upon him*. ‘Though there is something in that, that I remember now.’ (Chapter 44)

As these examples demonstrate, structuring verbs are used in a very similar manner to *say* to report Ralph Nickleby’s words. In this way, they help to shape his malevolent character (other glossing phrases found with structuring verbs are: *abruptly*, *carelessly*, *exasperated*, *fiercely*, *hoarsely*, *looking bitterly round*, *sarcastically* or *sharply*, among others). In light of these examples, it can be safely concluded that structuring verbs may be strategically used beyond the relief of monotony (Page, 1973: 26) mentioned in section 3, since they can also contribute to the creation of fictional personalities.

4. 3 Illocutionary Reporting Verbs

Thirdly, illocutionary reporting verbs are, unlike neutral and structuring verbs, “highly interpretative in terms of text mediation” (Caldas-Coulthard, 1987: 161). Therefore, they can fulfil a meaningful characterising role without the need for any glossing phrase. Because their main function is to make explicit the illocutionary force of the speech being reported, illocutionary reporting verbs can reveal specific attitudes of a character in a story. Thus, if a character is constantly giving orders (directive speech act), readers may get a different impression of him or her than if he or she constantly begs (expressive speech act), for instance. In the case of Ralph Nickleby, there is a verb which best reflects the characterising potential of this type of verbs: *demand*. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, twelve of the thirty-nine occurrences of this verb (see table 1) are associated with Ralph (see table 2), more than with any other character.[[5]](#footnote-5) The repeated use of this verb to gloss his words highlights his inquisitive character, as can be seen in examples (22) and (23).

(22) ‘What more do you know about him?’ *demanded* Ralph. (Chapter 34)

(23) ‘Which of your firm was it who called on me this morning?’ *demanded* Ralph. (Chapter 59)

It should be noted that Dickens also resorts to stylistically marked glossing phrases when using illocutionary reporting verbs. With regard to *demand*, four of the twelve occurrences of that verb that are associated with Ralph are accompanied by further information that enhances his bad temper, as can be seen in in examples (24) to (27).

(24) ‘Is Mrs Nickleby at home, girl?’ *demanded Ralph sharply*. (Chapter 3)

(25) ‘What insults, girl?’ *demanded Ralph, sharply*. (Chapter 28)

(26) ‘What DO you want, man?’ *demanded Ralph, sternly*. (Chapter 31)

(27) ‘What says he?’ *demanded Ralph, turning angrily upon her*. ‘I told you I would see nobody.’ (Chapter 59)

As is the case with the examples of neutral and structuring verbs that have previously been discussed, the use of interpretative glossing phrases with illocutionary reporting verbs contributes to portraying Ralph’s evil character. However, Dickens’s use of glossing phrases with interpretative reporting verbs should not be especially striking, since, as Caldas-Coulthard (1987: 165) points out, “some authors qualify verbs that are already signalling manner or attitude.” In any case, both the glossing phrases that accompany *demand* and the systematicity with which Dickens uses the verb to report Ralph’s discourse demonstrate the characterising potential of illocutionary reporting verbs, which can amplify the attitudinal traits of a character by making the illocutionary force of the reported speech act explicit.

4. 4 Discourse Signalling Verbs

Unlike illocutionary reporting verbs, discourse signalling verbs are “interpretatively empty” (Caldas-Coulthard, 1987: 164). However, they can also make a decisive contribution to characterisation in fictional narratives. As mentioned in section 2, they are used to convey liveliness in the process of interaction, indicating pauses, silences, interruptions, etc. It is well known that fictional dialogues are “tidied-up versions of talk” (Caldas Coulthard, 1988: 83). So, if aspects such as pauses, silences or interruptions are reported, then it is because they are extraordinarily meaningful (Caldas-Coulthard, 1987: 164). They may be used to reflect characters’ traits through their ways of speaking. Let us take the example of *interrupt*. Of the thirty-two occurrences of this reporting verb in *Nicholas Nickleby*, seven are associated with Ralph (see table 2). This verb is used to report his words more than those of any other character.[[6]](#footnote-6) The repeated use of *interrupt* clearly serves to illustrate his impoliteness, as can be seen in (28), which highlights his well-known rudeness when he does not let Charles Cheeryble finish his sentence.

(28) ‘Plainly, sir—’ began brother Charles.

‘Plainly, sir,’ *interrupted* Ralph, ‘I wish this conference to be a short one, and to end where it begins.’ (Chapter 59)

Moreover, as is the case with neutral, structuring and illocutionary reporting verbs, discourse signalling verbs are also frequently accompanied by interpretative glossing phrases that further reinforce Ralph’s characterisation, as can be seen in (29) to (31).

(29) ‘No they wouldn’t, ma’am,’ *interrupted Ralph, hastily*. ‘Don’t think it.’ (Chapter 3)

(30) ‘Yes, we know all about that, sir,’ *interrupted* *Ralph, testily*. ‘It’s in the advertisement.’ (Chapter 4)

(31) ‘Pray,’ *interrupted* *Ralph, motioning her to be silent*. ‘I spoke to my niece.’ (Chapter 19)

Both the repeated use of the verb and the stylistically marked phrases with which it is used demonstrate that the use of *interrupt* in connection with Ralph goes well beyond the aforementioned illusion of liveliness conveyed by discourse signalling verbs. Thus, although these verbs are not interpretative *per se*, the systematic choice of certain verbs can help to reinforce characters’ personalities by subtly enhancing features integrated in the wider picture of their characterisation.

4. 5 Descriptive Verbs

Finally, descriptive verbs are the most meaningful reporting verbs with regard to the creation of fictional personalities, since they refer to phonological and paralinguistic features that contribute to the expression of attitudes by the speaker rather than to the content of speech itself (Brown, 1990: 112). In the case of Ralph Nickleby, the following four verbs play a clear characterising function: *mutter*, *growl*, *snarl* and *sneer*. With sixteen occurrences, *mutter* is the fifth most frequently used verb to report Ralph’s words.[[7]](#footnote-7) The systematic use of this verb to project his discourse helps to convey Ralph’s complaining character, one of his best-known features. Although the verb tends to be used without any glossing phrases, as shown in (32), Dickens does also occasionally resort to adverbs —as in (33)— or prepositional phrases —as in (34)— to amplify Ralph’s grumpiness.

(32) ‘Saw I was anxious!’ *muttered* Ralph; ‘they all watch me, now. Where is this person? You did not say I was not down yet, I hope?’ (Chapter 59)

(33) ‘I am not a man to be moved by a pretty face,’ *muttered Ralph sternly*. ‘There is a grinning skull beneath it, and men like me who look and work below the surface see that, and not its delicate covering.’ (Chapter 31)

(34) ‘Has he turned girl or baby?’ *muttered Ralph, with a fretful gesture*. (Chapter 44)

With regard to *growl*, eight of the eleven occurrences of this verb are associated with Ralph. This verb clearly illustrates the habitual peevishness that contributes to shaping his malevolent portrayal. This verb is only accompanied by a glossing phrase once, which is shown in (35). This is probably due to its specificity. In the remaining seven cases, the verb is used without any further glossing elements. However, it is interesting to note that the words projected by *growl* often tend to be orders, as shown in (36) and (37). This further reinforces Ralph’s previously mentioned demanding character.

(35) ‘Oh,’ *growled Ralph, with an ill-favoured frown*, ‘you are Nicholas, I suppose?’ (Chapter 3)

(36) ‘Don’t begin to cry,’ *growled* Ralph; ‘I hate crying.’ (Chapter 10)

(37) ‘Tell me what you mean. What is this story? Who told you? Speak,’ *growled* Ralph. ‘Do you hear me?’ (Chapter 34)

Finally, *snarl* and *sneer*, although they are each only used twice, also have a meaningful function with regard to characterisation. The double use of *snarl* shown in (38) and (39) reinforces Ralph’s peevishness, which is projected by other reporting verbs such as *growl*. One of the two occurrences of the verb is accompanied by an interpretative glossing phrase, which emphasises Ralph’s irascible character, as shown in (39).

(38) ‘Who, indeed!’ *snarled* Ralph. (Chapter 3)

(39) ‘What!’ *snarled Ralph, clenching his fists and turning a livid white*. (Chapter 34)

The use of *sneer*, however, serves to illustrate Ralph’s slyness, as shown in (40) and (41). Although neither of those two occurrences is accompanied by a glossing phrase, the characterising function behind this choice also seems clear, especially considering that Ralph’s sneering is referred to elsewhere in the novel several times, as we have already seen in (12).

(40) ‘Ah, to be sure!’ *sneered* Ralph. (Chapter 3)

(41) ‘You do not?’ *sneered* Ralph. (Chapter 20)

In sum, it can hardly be denied that Dickens’s use of reporting verbs to gloss Ralph’s words is far from serendipitous. On the contrary, his selection of verbs seems to be deliberate, arising from Dickens’s will to design a speech which matches the villain’s grumpiness. The use of descriptive verbs such as *mutter*, *growl*, *snarl* and *sneer* are the clearest examples, as they all openly reveal attitudinal traits that contribute to the depiction of Ralph’s character. However, any verb, from neutral or structuring verbs accompanied by glossing phrases to illocutionary or discourse signalling verbs that point out Ralph’s demanding character or his habit of interrupting, may also be stylistically significant. Taken all together, they help to shape Ralph’s identity by means of an idiosyncratic way of speaking that has a direct impact on his portrayal. In short, the example of Ralph Nickleby illustrates the characterising potential of reporting verbs in literary texts.

Finally, the potential of reporting verbs in the creation of fictional personalities is better understood within the framework of characterisation as a process —how we, as readers, form impressions of characters in our minds during the course of a story (cf. Culpeper, 2001). This is best reflected in the fact that the thirty-one examples discussed in section 4 are taken from fourteen different chapters of the novel: 3, 4, 10, 19, 20, 28, 31, 34, 38, 44, 47, 51, 56 and 59. The use of stylistically significant reporting verbs throughout the novel —and the interpretative glossing phrases that accompany seemingly unbiased choices— help to create a cumulative effect that results in a powerful device for shaping characters’ identities. In this respect, the case of Ralph is particularly interesting, as Dickens published his novels serially and this greatly influenced his well-known techniques of characterisation (Patten, 2006: 15). However, the potential of reporting verbs in the creation of fictional personalities in the course of a novel goes well beyond a stylistically excessive author such as Dickens. It is also worth analysing the work of other Victorian authors who published serially, as time lapses between instalments made characterisation “a distinct element with its own problems” (Sucksmith, 1970: 250) in 19th-century fiction. In fact, any fictional narrative is actually worthy of analysis, since characterisation in literary works relies heavily on the well-established relationship between voice stereotypes and personality types (Culpeper, 2001: 215). As has been demonstrated here, reporting verbs play a role of paramount importance in bringing this relationship closer together.

5. Conclusion

Reporting verbs can play an important function in the creation of fictional personalities in literary texts. Normally, both in and beyond fiction, this function is usually only acknowledged in the case of those verbs that describe phonological or paralinguistic features that reveal meaningful attitudes about the person(a) whose words are being reported. However, as the example of Ralph Nickleby has demonstrated, any verb may potentially contribute to characterisation. Of course, there exist remarkable differences between neutral and non-neutral verbs, and a cline of interference may even be drawn, from the most neutral verbs (*say* and *tell*, but also structuring examples such as *ask* or *reply*) to the most interpretative choices (descriptive verbs), with illocutionary and discourse signalling verbs in a middle position. As far as more neutral verbs are concerned, authors frequently qualify these verbs with glossing phrases in order to match the specificity of more specific cases (for instance, *said with a sneer*, which conveys the same effect that *sneer*, to use two examples discussed here). These glossing phrases are not exclusive of less interpretative types of verbs, such as neutral and structuring verbs, but are also used to reinforce the value of more specific choices, such as illocutionary reporting verbs (*demanded Ralph, turning angrily upon her*) and discourse signalling verbs (*interrupted Ralph, testily*). However, illocutionary and discourse signalling verbs can also have a meaningful characterising role by themselves. Thus, the fact that Ralph systematically demands or interrupts contributes to his portrayal as an impolite character. Finally, descriptive reporting verbs provide the clearest examples, as they openly reveal the attitude of the speaker. Thus, the impression that readers form in their minds of a character who pouts, mourns, whines and whimpers will be diametrically opposed to that of a character like Ralph, who regularly growls, mutters, snarls and sneers. In sum, any verb has the potential to contribute to the creation of fictional personalities. In fact, as the example of Ralph Nickleby has demonstrated, both more and less specific choices —the latter with the help of interpretative glossing phrases— create a cumulative effect over the course of the story that enables him to be characterised through his specific way of speaking. The stylistic significance of reporting verbs, therefore, should not be underestimated, as they can be a powerful device for the creation of fictional personalities in literary texts.

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1. The 501 occurrences analysed are all from stretches of direct speech presentation, the most widely used strategy among nineteenth-century English novelists (Busse, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Out of necessity, the description that follows is very brief, and primarily focuses on the saliency of reporting verbs from the point of view of characterisation. For a more detailed account of each category, see Caldas-Coulthard (1987, 1988, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Chapter location rather than page numbers were preferred, since chapters will be later on referred to when discussing the value of reporting verb in terms of characterisation in the course of the novel (see section 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For a more detailed account of the character, see the entry “Ralph Nickleby” in Hawes (2002: 165). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Squeers is the character with which *demand* is used more frequently after Ralph (five times). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mrs. Nickleby and Nicholas are the characters who *interrupt* more frequently after Ralph (three times each). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Cry*, another descriptive verb, is also used sixteen times to report Ralph’s words (see table 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)