TRANSITIONS SEMINAR NEWSLETTER 14 May 2024

Bimonthly, edited by M. Aguirre

The *Transitions Seminar* is a permanent initiative set up in 2019 by the LIMEN Research Group. It convenes approximately on a bi-monthly basis, online since 2020. It provides a forum for debate on liminality and related issues, and a research-training ground for PhD candidates, as well as functioning as a venue for the current *Transitions Project*. It is linked to The Gateway Press and the websites *LIMEN & TEXT*, *The Northanger Library*, and *The Janus Gate Project*.

http://www.limenandtext.com/rst.html
http://www.limenandtext.com/index.html
https://northangerlibrary.com/
http://janusgateliterature.com/

1. The TS Newsletter

Legend has it that, in the early days of the British Broadcasting Corporation, a newsreader could allow himself the luxury of announcing, 'This is the BBC. There is no news.' Alas, the times have changed, and a newsletter without news is a contradiction in terms; but this is nearly the only news to be had this month. We have no speaker for the month of June, no sample of liminality publications, no info regarding the Limen & Text website. The show must go on, though, and the May issue is due. Which is another way of saying that contributions to the Newsletter are always welcome.

2. The Transitions Seminar, third series (2023-24)

With the academic year grinding to a halt, we can sum up the encounters of the TS Seminar since October.

TS10. 26 October 2023 Paola del Zoppo
'Liminal Spaces and Liminal Emotions in *Girlfriend on Mars,* by Deborah Willis, and *Die Farbe des Granatsapfels,* by Anna Baar.'

TS11. 12 December 2023 Manuel Aguirre
'Modelling the Limen.'

TS12. 20 February 2024 Verónica Frejo
'*Critical Role*: Embodied Liminality in Role-Playing Games.'

TS13. 7 May 2024 Beatriz Sánchez
'The Mathematics Inhabiting the Limen.'

We are grateful to speakers, and request copy of their talks for inclusion in *The TRELLIS Papers*. Video recordings will be appearing in *LIMEN & TEXT*. We look forward to starting the new academic year with a talk by our colleague Francisco Fuentes sometime in October (I hope to have more detailed info for the July Newsletter). Proposals for talks are welcome for 2024-25.

3. Notes, Queries, Responses

LIMINALITY AND THE SUBJUNCTIVE
Manuel Aguirre

Victor Turner associates ordinary social structure with the 'indicative' mood, and designates the neophyte's separation from society in the liminal stage of the ritual process as a move from the indicative to the 'subjunctive.' The notion is highly suggestive, and provides a helpful colouring for the liminal stage, presenting it as a *suspension* of factuality:

> The subjunctive, according to Webster's Dictionary, is always concerned with 'wish, desire, possibility, or hypothesis'; it is a world of 'as if,' ranging from scientific hypothesis to festive fantasy. It is 'if it *were* so,' not 'it is so.'[1]

But there is something odd about this definition. Applied to the liminal, the terms 'wish,' 'desire,' 'possibility,' 'festive,' 'as if' all seem to present it as a positive setting characterised by openness, promise, expectation, the desiderative or the imaginative.

The question is, what subjunctive? One must presume that Webster's Dictionary means to portray the English subjunctive only; unlike French, Italian, German or Spanish, the English language is almost destitute of a *formal* subjunctive.[2] But the fact is that the dictionary quote given moves ambiguously between morphological, syntactic, and semantic understandings.

1) Morphologically (involving purely lexical forms), 'wish, desire, possibility, or hypothesis' accommodate only the last of the three types of subjunctive (mandative, formulaic, and *were*-subjunctive) listed by Quirk & al.:

> The *were*-subjunctive is hypothetical in meaning and is used in conditional and concessive clauses and in subordinate clauses after optative verbs like *wish* […]. This subjunctive is restricted to one form: *were*.[3]

2) Syntactically (sometimes we read of 'subjunctive clauses' or 'syntactic subjunctive'), other senses than the desiderative obtain in constructions such as 'I had better not,' 'if it should rain', 'had I known,' as well as in constructions engaging 'should', 'might,' and other modal verbs, all of which involve periphrastic arrangements rather than inflected verb forms.

3) Semantically, when linguists view 'subjunctive' as covering more than just lexis or syntax they rather tend to speak of *modality*, which comprehends various *moods*, among them the subjunctive (*modus irrealis*), realised by either verb forms (inflection) or clause constructions (e.g., with modal verbs, or with subordinating conjunctions like *unless*, *until, lest*, or relatives like *whoever*). In this light, the semantics of the subjunctive mood will be found to open up considerably beyond the limited range proposed by Webster's or Quirk & al. There would be, *inter alia*,

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[1] Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 83.

[2] According to Downing and Locke, its manifestations are vestigial, 'fossilised,' either indistinguishable from the infinitive or reduced to a minute number of archaic survivals. See Angela Downing and Philip Locke, *A University Course in English Grammar* (London: Routledge, 2003), 170.

[3] Randolph Quirk, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech, Jan Svartvik, *A Grammar of Contemporary English* (London: Longman, 1974), p. 77.

- the prayer and blessing forms ('Angels and ministers of grace defend us!,' 'God save the king,' 'may the Force be with you')
- the concessive ('come what may,' 'Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd, / Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell, / Be thy intents wicked or charitable…'—*Hamlet*, I.iv.39-43)
- the mandative ('we demand / require / move / insist / suggest / ask that he attend the proceedings in person'),[4] which includes prohibition and warning ('you had better not,' 'suffice it to say,' 'I insist that it stop immediately')[5]
- the deontic ('it is right / necessary / proper / high time that he learn the truth')
- the expression of emotions where there is no question of the truth or reality of the event that rouses anger, shame, pain, anxiety, regret, or surprise; the factuality of such events is simply *not* being addressed, questioned or denied, speakers limiting themselves to conveying their attitude towards them ('It's funny you should say that,' 'she was angry that he wouldn't budge')
- hesitation or diffidence ('what dreams may come,' 'I doubt that this should be relevant')
- the conditional ('Were it not for him, I should speak up')[6]
- the counterfactual, what Jespersen (1933: 255) calls *unreality* ('had you been there'; 'you speak as if I had money enough')
- fear (the title of Frank Belknap Long's science-fiction novel *Lest Earth Be Conquered* does not simply convey possibility but outright dread).

It is legitimate to subsume many of these (not all) under a terse 'possibility'; but then there is no call for singling out 'wish,' 'desire' or 'hypothesis' above the others, since these, too, fall under the umbrella of the possible.

If the liminal is to be metaphorised as the subjunctive, then the tenor must assume the full semantic load of the vehicle; and it transpires that, as a mood rather than as a set of verbal forms, the subjunctive is also the province of condition, uncertainty, regret, necessity, fear, warning, the counterfactual, the impossible. As well as desiderative, it is *aversive*; it can be construed as easily in the negative, or in the spirit of abjection ('God forbid,' 'may it never be so'). These values tally well with the protean nature of limina, which, besides their promissory charge, can be deeply disturbing domains; danger and threat are as much a property of threshold space as is promise. We are talking about sites where things might take a turn for the better—or for the worse; where we can get lost; where the nexus between means and ends, cause and effect, desire and realisation may be compromised or broken; where, as T. S. Eliot puts it in *The Hollow Men,* 'Between the idea / And the reality / Between the motion / And the act / Falls the Shadow.'[7] The space of this shadow, too, is the realm of the limen.

It is, of course, always possible to cut this Gordian knot through disambiguation—by claiming, for instance, that the limen is a place of adjustment and growth, while sites where the subject is detained or destroyed are anomalous limina, or not liminal at all. Sociologist Karsten Giese candidly writes that 'within the context of ritual passages, a key feature of liminality is the final stage of reintegration.'[8] Does it follow that where reintegration does not occur there is no 'proper' liminality? Consider the labyrinth in which countless young men perished but where

[4] Quirk & al. (1974: 77).

[5] Dwight Bolinger, 'Postposed Main Phrases: An English Rule for the Romance Subjunctive', *Canadian Journal of Linguistics* 14: 1 (1968), 3-30, p. 5.

[6] Otto Jespersen, *Essentials of English Grammar* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1933), 256.

[7] T. S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men*, in *Selected Poems* (London: Faber, 1972), p. 80.

[8] Karsten Giese (2017), 'Chinese Traders in Ghana: The Liminality Trap, and Challenges for Ethnic Formation and Integration,' in M. Zhou (ed.), *Contemporary Chinese Diasporas* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan), 53-78, p. 60.

Theseus triumphed: was it liminal in his case but not in theirs? (Or conversely?). I surmise that the limen is in all instances ambiguous, double- (or multi-) edged, endowed with a potential which *precedes* valuation; and that the subjunctive is an excellent metaphor for the limen so long as its full semantic range is taken into account.[9]

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[9] My thanks to Celia Marqués Amorós for a very spirited discussion on the concepts of subjunctive, mood and modality.