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La saillance et le discours sur le relief

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Saliency and Relief-Related Discourse

An introduction

Samia Ounoughi

- 1 This issue of the *Journal of Alpine Research* gathers articles that all question relief-related discourse, in particular mountain-related discourse through the linguistic notion of saliency. Saliency is a term of Latin origin and has recently been adapted to French “saillance” in the field of linguistics where it generally refers to any phenomenon of emphasis. It is precisely because the mountains are by nature salient objects of geography that we would like to bring closer the two disciplines of discourse analysis (and picture analysis) and Alpine geography through the concept of saliency. Lying at the crossroads of geography, linguistics and discourse analysis, the leading idea of this volume is to explore texts and paintings of various genres (treaties of aesthetics, novels, poems, schoolbooks, etc.) dating from the turn of the XIXth century to the present day so as to analyse the means at work in discourse to give shape to relief.
- 2 The perception of the Alpine Arch has undergone a great evolution since the end of the XVIIIth century, especially thanks to travellers visiting from Britain. Scientists, sportspeople, artists and writers have in turn visited the Alps for more than two centuries. The way they have looked upon the Alps has greatly contributed to change the way we look at the mountains. Under their quill, the once terrifying mountains were to become a place of beauty and awe (Bätzing and Rougier, *Les Alpes : un foyer de civilisation au cœur de l'Europe*, 2005). Mountains thenceforth began to host more and more diverse visitors whose stay or passage in the Alps contributed in their turn to change their physical, human or social geography, among other aspects. Geographers Bätzing and Rougier (2005) have also highlighted the role played by the perception of foreigners whose daily environment does not display such imposing geographical relief as the Alps. The novelty of this range of landscapes in their eyes is transcribed in their discourse by bringing into relief traits which Alpine peoples no longer notice with such surprise or novelty.

- 3 Saliency-related phenomena have long interested specialists of physical geography, (the word “sailance” is not used by geomorphologists in French); these phenomena have even become the core object of study in geomorphology (Le Cœur, 1996). In human geography, saliency has been approached in various ways. For years, it has been seen as a fact observed from the point of view of both constraint and opportunity (Géneau de Lamarlière and Staszak, 2000). In cultural geography, saliency is rather approached from the point of view of construction. Indeed, in so far as it conveys values, stirs the imagination and enhances practice, language contributes to the construction of our representations of reality (Debarbieux, 2002) and thus contributes to the construction of the mountain as an individualized object (Debarbieux and Rudaz, 2010). Moreover, Raffestin (1995) based the epistemology of a branch of geography on the grounds of language/territory links.
- 4 Whether it issues from the very nature of the object referred to as salient; from the place of this object in its environment or from the inherent characteristics of the subject who experiences it (cf. the categories of saliency, Landragin, 2011), saliency has become an important theme of research in linguistics. Various schools of linguistics have already issued publications on saliency (Landragin, 2004, 2011; Haude, Montaut, 2012; Inkova, 2011; Boisseau, symposium in Strasburg in 2010, to be published). The aim of these works which explore various languages is to issue a more precise definition of saliency and to point out the forms saliency may take in language. Eventually this will help precise what this concept can bring to discourse analysis. Finally, Landragin suggests extending the use of the notion to other disciplines to which it can bring a new insight (cf. Landragin’s parallel between saliency in photography and in narrative discourse, 2011).
- 5 This project more largely revolves around a questioning of how relief is framed in discourse through tools of pragmatics. Discourse construction is analysed from the point of view of linguistics in its broadest sense. The articles deal with the forms and structures inherent to a language (certain structures may be common to different languages).
- 6 How can the notion of saliency in linguistics be put in relation with relief related discourse? How can intrinsically salient elements of discourse (linguistic marks, rhetorical forms...) contribute to the construction of the discourse on the mountain and how do they single it out? To what degree does the subject who takes charge of their speech redefine saliency in their perception and representation of the mountains?
- 7 The authors of these papers seek to bring to the forefront the relation between discourse analysis and the definition of the mountains and, more largely, of relief according to the enunciator’s perception which will be put in the perspective of what they are used to seeing in their environment. This is precisely why texts in foreign languages are particularly interesting. The roof of Great-Britain (Ben Nevis in Scotland) being 1344 m high, one can expect from the alienage of the British traveller’s perception the emergence of linguistic and discursive forms that undoubtedly heighten to a higher degree the distinction of traits proper to reliefs and depressions.
- 8 In her article entitled “The Mountain Sublime of Philip James de Louthembourg and Joseph Mallord William Turner”, Aurélie Tremblet explores saliency in the highest form of relief: high mountains (the Alps). Through early XIXth century British painting and poetry saliency is rendered manifest in high mountains, especially in the occurrence of violent avalanches. These works do not result from the experience of both artists but from their imagination of space. Thenceforth what credit can be granted to these

representations? What do they teach us about relief? Beyond the natural saliency of relief, it is the paradigms of the relation between man and high mountains which is highlighted in this analysis. Saliency is here considered as a set of pictorial and poetic techniques that echo one another to express the dreadful, awesome and destructive relief. Here saliency is first and foremost the experience of awe. From imagination to materiality, the saliency of relief is shaped with palette knife painting and thickened paint on canvas. The bodily ties between man and the mountains are woven poetically, notably in line enjambments. Saliency is defined through the apprehension of an unknown relief that is expressed through romanticism, the genre of exaltation_ here mixed with fear. It is conceived through games of movements which reveal that mountains, desert as they may be, are alive. First, the avalanche puts relief in motion. Then, the effects of distance and proportion between the characters and the mountains remind us that relief is not only a given immutable object. The location of man on relief must be closely considered, for it alters relief's degree of saliency. The analysis of saliency in these works brings examples of what inspired alpinism and that contributed to the shaping of high mountains.

- 9 Later on, once the mountain has been explored, it partakes of the horizon of expectations of the traveller seeking to discover it. The travel writer or the artist, the geographer, the sociologist or the anthropologist goes to the mountains in quest of what they already know of them and what attracted them there; Ruskin's texts are very interesting in this respect. In "*Of Ruskinian Topography: Visible and legible Saliency in Modern Painters*" Laurence Roussillon-Constanty explores the work of Ruskin, a geologist, alpinist, painter, and art critic. The author dedicates her article to the fourth out of five volumes of *Modern Painters* in which Ruskin founds the principles of pictorial representations of mountains, the aim of such representations being to render faithfully the natural work composed by nature itself on canvas.
- 10 According to Ruskin, painters need to alter the way they look at natural relief and learn to perceive how the passing of time has shaped its saliency. Realism in a painting is to be sought in a physical recognition of relief constitution as resulting from geology. Ruskin insists, for he aims at influencing the whole mode of representation of relief and thus he gives what could be called his own definition of saliency. This approach is mainly to be found in Volume IV of *Modern Painters* and it is Ruskin's specific prose that embodies his discourse on method. In this volume, Ruskin gives body to relief by his specific use of typology. He puts the mountains in a geological synchrony by using a type of punctuation which slows temporality down. The lexical fields of the minuscule and the immense focus the painter's attention on the scale variations and on the relations between relief and whoever contemplates it. These are elements of discourse saliency which invite artists to give shape and perspective to the mountains whilst respecting their history.
- 11 André Dodeman takes us beyond the Atlantic in his article entitled: "The Ascent of the Artist in Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley* (1952). The author analyses saliency in the discourse of a Canadian novel where the mountain_ though barely reaching 300m, is established as both a landmark and the ultimate shelter in the life of a writer who was born and lives in a valley, in between mounts. Through his analysis of discursive saliency, which lies in a specific rhetoric and typography_ the mountains as brackets, the article unveils the close relationship between the writer, the discourse on writing and the discourse on the mountains. The latter three are conceived mutually and it is in this essential intertwining that the construction of knowledge about space is at

work. The order of space is determined by the mountains which command life in the valley. Thus does André Dodeman confirm Frédéric Landragin's claim that salience has no sense but in relativity. "salience is first and foremost the surfacing of a form from a background, it is bringing forward one entity rather than others. Being salient means being particularly outstanding to the point of catching attention and offering a hook, a starting point to comprehension." (Landragin 2012, 15). The fragmentary character and so the chaotic life in the valley only make sense with the contemplation and eventual ascension of these mountains which embody unity, unlike the valley. Knowing the relief, which determines the comprehension of space and humans' lives, only reveals itself on the performative mode. First, that of perception, then of writing and eventually ascending. It is therefore the salience of the discourse itself that relief stems from, relief being essential to the comprehension of space and the life of those whom it shelters.

- 12 The notion of relief is a crucial basis which is seminal in the learning of relief the mountains being its most salient forms. Yet, relief and mountain turn out to be much more abstract notions than they appear at first sight when it comes to teaching them, especially to children. It is this delicate and challenging process that Alexandra Baudinault invites us to explore. In her article "'Relief' and 'Mountain': How to Shape Children's Imagination at Primary School: Saying, Imagining, Representing, Learning the Mountains' Relief in France" the author analyses salience in the didactics of geography in primary school. Along the line, she questions the conceptualisation of salience, that of the geographical object, of its relation with the rest of the environment and the necessary commitment of the subject so as to perceive it before they can understand it. The three categories of salience as defined by Frédéric Landragin (2012) can all be found here. In children's imagination, the analogy between relief and mountain is easily achieved since mountains are the ultimate salient geographical objects.
- 13 Yet, how can the notion of relief be taught to children without being limited to the notion of mountain? For lack of updated and adapted teaching material, relief is always approached through physical geography and often disconnected from human, social or cultural geography, which is in contradiction with the official instructions. Thus tackled, the notion seems easier to teach, especially if children are first led to distinguish the mountains. Yet, observations performed in class reveal the abstract character of the words "mountain" and "relief", especially when children are expected to find out about these notions at a much smaller scale and on two-dimensional representations such as photographs or maps. Following this experiment on the ground, the author suggests that children make geographic material with their own hands, a haptic approach which will enable them to sense and seize relief in its diversity and thenceforth initiate a dynamic process which will directly involve children in their discovery of space.
- 14 Language creativity is also needed when facing challenges such as putting into words what one has never seen and / or what is not yet part of a given linguistic landscape. At the crossroads of the constraints imposed by blindness and the precepts of a non-representational aesthetic movement, Madeline Gins's work is an invitation to find out about a tandem of artists: Hellen Keller_ a blind and deaf writer, and Arakawa_ an architect and decorator, in their challenge to put relief into discourse by giving relief to discourse. This is the object of the article by Marie-Dominique Garnier entitled: "Salience and Blindness: a Haptic Journey on Mount Gins (On Heller Keller Or Arakawa by Madeline Gins)". How much salience is left of a mountain landscape when one cannot see it? How can relief be put into words without using the codes that preside over our perception of

it? foreground / background, form / substance, remote / close, top / bottom, etc. this whole system of relativity on which our cognitive schemes are all based fails when it comes to explaining the landscape to a blind person.

- 15 It is by putting the sense of touch into words “in the language of the sighted” that the concept of saliency is thought afresh, thus opening new ways and means to access knowledge on relief. Play on words, text construction, the enunciator’s point of view, etc. are a few among the numerous discursive aspects revisited by the writer’s creativity. This creativity is displayed in domains as varied and unexpected as phonology where tactile homophones (site) provide meaningful substitutes for visual (sight) homophones. It is also to be found in noun determination, which in the context of blindness, bares little consistence or relevance. This is but a sample of the possibilities that the poetics of prose have to offer our modes of apprehension of relief, embracing both its saliency and its “faultline” or “failance”. Discourse, however, only succeeds in expressing relief differently by displacing or relocating the perceiver subject. In the world of the sighted, the subject is in the centre of the environment they contemplate; the blind must have experienced relief otherwise they can’t perceive it.
- 16 Research in art and literature has long focused on the exploration of time and its modes of representation in texts and paintings which themselves tell a story. For some twenty years now, research has adopted a more spatial mode of reflexion, questioning space and its representations not only through a purely descriptive method to depict landscapes, but rather structurally questioning the text as a space and discourse as its arrangement. Some geographers analyse the parallels between discourse and space organisation: “Among all the materials that might be retained whilst reflecting on space, discourse is certainly the most yielding. In terms of land settlement, discourse is seminal, for it directly partakes of the space-production process.” (Gumuchian *et al.*, 2000, 335). Moreover, geography again seeks to analyse texts of fiction (Brosseau, 2013, 2011, 1996 ; Chevalier, 1993, etc.). This approach our disciplines have in common has inspired the core idea of this issue of the *Journal of Alpine Research*, namely putting into parallel geographical relief and linguistic saliency. Saliency is quite naturally associated with relief, and even more with the mountains, as it is their natural attribute. The articles highlight a whole range of discursive and pictorial traits all showing that relief, beyond its being naturally salient, partakes both of perceived and produced saliency (Boisseau and Hamm, 2015, 9). Thus the semantics of keywords in the lexical field of relief, which often, and rightly so, catch the geographer’s attention turn out to be but a slender portion of what discourse can tell us about relief. The fields in which discursive saliency appears are as varied as phonology, narratology, versification, enunciation and cognitive linguistics and they are here brought to the forefront. These discursive forms which are not all thoroughly explored in this volume _creativity renders carrying out such a task quite impossible, can be understood as tools for representing relief, and even as the very material relief is composed of. This collective reflexion on saliency and relief-related discourse opens perspectives to explore scientific discourse itself. Texts written by geomorphologists, geologists and geographers could be analysed so as to understand how their written productions of our knowledge of relief and the mountains permeate the world of science and more broadly our comprehension of space.
- 17 I am very grateful to the members of the scientific committee of the *Journal of Alpine Research* who broadened the scope of the journal, taking their interdisciplinary reflexion on relief and the mountains a step further. The articles were all peer-reviewed by both a

specialist of discourse or language analysis and a specialist of geography or human sciences. The articles selected for publication were chosen for the mutual enrichment they bring to both ranges of disciplines, which was the leading idea of this project.

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