

Sabrina Francesconi

“It Seemed to Me It Might Be True”

Formal and Functional Variation of *Seem*-patterns in Munro’s Stories

Abstract

This work explores formal and functional variation of the seem-verb in Alice Munro’s early stories Dance of the Happy Shades (1968) and Lives of Girls and Women (1971), predominantly first-person narratives marked by profound subjectivity. Through a manual selection of items and a quantitative and qualitative analysis, the article seeks to provide linguistic evidence for and discuss the role of seem in what Howells calls (1998, 85) Munro’s “art of indeterminacy,” that is, a style pervaded by vagueness and elusiveness. The semantics of the seem-verb class (evidentiality, modality, subjectivity, intersubjectivity) is addressed through the multiple forms it presents: seem + AdjP/NP, seem + to infinitive VP, seem that, seem like, seem as if, and parenthetical seem. Results show that the verb floats among attributive, cognitive and perceptual functions, as well as between evidential and epistemic values (e.g., Aijmer 2009; Biber et al. 1999; Johansson 2001; Johnson 2010; Usoniene and Šinkūnienė 2013). As such, it questions categories of factuality, clarity, and stability. Shaping “a grammar of point of view” (Neary 2014; Simpson 1993), seem encodes first-person accounts based on uncertain and unstable focalisers and narrators and reveals point of view as blurred.

Keywords: *seem, formal and functional variation, evidential and epistemic values, grammar of point of view, Alice Munro’s early stories*

1. Introduction

The excerpt “it seemed to me it might be true” used in the title comes from Alice Munro’s short story “Boys and Girls.” The first-person narrator and eleven-year-old protagonist finds herself in an insufferable context. She is watching her father and a hired man kill Mack: the meat of the old horse will be used to feed the silver foxes the father raises. When her brother says that Mack is not dead, she confesses: “it seemed to me it might be true” (1997, 124). The animal’s blood, however, reveals the opposite: the horse has been shot dead. This clause frames the girl’s subjective perception in opposition to factivity, influenced by her wish that Mack be alive. The modal verb *might* expresses possibility (as a low modality marker); the indirect

personal pronoun *to me* conveys subjectivity (positions the character explicitly); the anticipatory *it* frames subjectification (refers to the narrator or the character implicitly); the verb *seem* shapes a semantic system of appearance (in opposition to factivity) which tempers the proposition. Hence, the girl's viewpoint is constructed through the intersection of evidential markers (related to the source of information) and epistemic markers (expressing degrees of certainty or factivity), as well as through the tension between subjectivity and subjectification. We therefore address formal and functional variation of the *seem*-verb in Alice Munro's early stories *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) and *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971). Specialised literature (e.g., Aijmer 2009; Biber et al. 1999; Johansson 2001; Johnson 2010; Usoniene and Šinkūnienė 2013) shows that the *seem*-verb class is polymorphic and polysemic; its multifunctionality is instantiated in diverse patterns (*seem* + adj. or noun, *seem* + infinitive, *seem that*, *seem like*, *seem as if*, parenthetical *seem*, and the presence of the indirect personal pronoun). If the *seem*-verb primarily expresses evidentiality and epistemic modality (degree of certainty and speaker's commitment to the truth of the assertion), it also encodes subjectivity (indirect personal pronoun) and intersubjectivity (parenthetical *it seems that*). Through a manual selection of items and a quantitative and qualitative analysis, this work aims to provide linguistic evidence for and discuss the role of *seem* in what Coral Ann Howells calls Munro's "art of indeterminacy" (1998, 85). Munro's texts are indeed described as pervaded by an overall aura of vagueness and elusiveness. Stories are frequently told by unstable, unreliable, fluid narrators, fractured and elliptic syntax often relies on right-dislocations as reformulations, while endings are open, mysteries unsolved, truths ungraspable (Howells 1998).

The paper is organised as follows: Section 1 provides an introduction; Section 2 reviews previous literature on *seem*-patterns, while Section 3 outlines the adopted method and the analysed texts. If Section 4 illustrates the multiple and layered meanings of *seem*, and Section 5 explores several forms of the verb, Section 6 focuses on the co-presence of *seem* and experiencer. An analysis of the formal and functional variation of *seem* in the short stories, as well as a discussion of its narrative and stylistic implicatures is offered in Section 7.

2. Literature review

The recent tradition of linguistic inspection of Munro's *oeuvre* is largely concerned with patterns in her narratives that contribute to shaping her fragmented, fractured, blurred, and elusive style (Pennec 2016; Pillière 2015). Close-reading studies focus on punctuation markers (Bigot 2015), conjunctions (Blin 2010, 2015a, 2015b; Pennec 2016), transitivity (Francesconi 2017a), modality (Somacarrera 1996), subjectivity and subjectivation (Hrisonopulo 2014), focalisation

(Ignjatović 2022), sentence and clause type (Toolan 2010), and conversational style (Pillière 2015). Apart from brief mentions in Somacarrera (1996) and Hrisonopulo (2014), however, there has been no systemic exploration of the verb *seem* in Munro's stories. The current work aims to fill this critical void.

Hence, the reference literature for this article is drawn from grammars, from other domains and fields, or from literary studies that refer to different authors. Biber et al. (1999, 435-439) classify *seem* as a copular verb, as a verb that links some attribute to the subject. Specifically, it is a current copular verb, since it describes an attribute in a continuing state of existence (other verbs falling into this category are *be*, *appear*, *keep*, *remain*, and *stay*). *Seem* can be ascribed to the primary semantic domains of likelihood and personal attitudes. Aijmer (2009), Usoniene and Šinkūnienė (2013), address the verb as expressing evidentiality, as being related to the source of information, de Haan (2007) relates *seem* to subjectification as a grammaticalization phenomenon, whereas Hyland (1998) discusses the verb as a hedging device used to temper a proposition. Corpus-based cross-linguistic analyses of *seem*-verbs have been conducted in English (e.g., Johnson 2010; Aijmer 2009), Norwegian (Johansson 2001), Swedish (Aijmer 2009), Lithuanian (Usoniene and Šinkūnienė 2013), German and Dutch (de Haan 2007) and Italian (Johnson 2010). Several studies have addressed fiction and non-fiction texts (e.g., Aijmer 2009; Johansson 2001), while others have exclusively focused on literary discourse (Talal 2017; Usoniene and Šinkūnienė 2013; Johansson 2001), or on scientific discourse (Hyland 1998). The discussion on the narrative implicatures of the verb *seem* relies on studies in stylistics that have outlined “a grammar of point of view” in narratives based on the verbal system of modality (Neary 2014; Simpson 1993). These frameworks are grounded on the pioneering studies on point of view—understood as the narrative perspective from which events and thoughts are described—by Genette (1980), Fowler (1996), and Uspensky (1973). Expanding Fowler's model, Simpson (1993, 50) distinguishes between Category A narratives (homodiegetic narrator) and Category B narratives (heterodiegetic narrator). A further difference is envisaged between reflector mode and narratorial mode. Point of view in the former is the consciousness of a participating character, whereas in the latter is that of a not-participating one (Simpson 1993, 51). Simpson integrates such frame with the system of modality and creates a modal grammar of point of view (Neary 2014, 182). As a result of such interpersonal analysis of point of view, a narrative can differently show positive shading (+ve, i.e., a tangible narrative), neutral shading (i.e., modality is absent), or negative shading (–ve), i.e., if intangible (Simpson 1993, 50f). After this outline of the relevant reference literature, the next section illustrates the adopted methodology and the examined texts.

3. Methodology and materials

This pilot study focuses on two short-story collections from Munro's early work, predominantly first-person narratives marked by profound subjectivity, namely *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) and *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971).¹ The first anthology features fifteen independent short stories, while the second includes a series of seven interconnected stories and an epilogue but was promoted and distributed as a novel (Thacker 2011, 210ff). The collection *Dance* includes the following short stories: "Walker Brothers Cowboy," "The Shining Houses," "Images," "Thanks for the Ride," "The Office," "An Ounce for Cure," "The Time of Death," "Day of the Butterfly," "Boys and Girls," "Postcard," "Red Dress—1947," "Sunday Afternoon," "A Trip to the Coast," "The Peace of Utrecht," and "Dance of the Happy Shades." *Lives* includes: "The Flats Road," "Heirs of the Living Body," "Princess Ida," "Age of Faith," "Changes and Ceremonies," "Lives of Girls and Women," "Baptizing," and "Epilogue: The Photographer." The setting for both volumes is Southwestern Ontario, the region where the writer grew up and returned after her divorce (Thacker 2011, Chapter 2).

Through a manual selection of items and a quantitative and qualitative analysis, the behaviour of *seem*-patterns will be explored and discussed. We will consider a) the frequency of diverse *seem*-patterns; b) the configuration of the following *seem*-patterns: *seem* + adjective phrase or noun phrase (*seem* + AdjP/NP), *seem* + infinitive verb phrase (*seem* + infinitive VP), *seem that*, *seem like*, *seem as if*, parenthetical *seem*, c) the functional value of *seem*-patterns, including predominantly evidential, epistemic, or intersubjective functions, d) the distribution of *to me* forms across *seem*-patterns, e) the narrative and stylistic effects of the use of *seem*-patterns in the two collections. *Seem*-patterns with the indirect personal pronoun will be considered as a sub-corpus of the total *seem*-verb total corpus.

The discussion on the narrative implicatures of the verb *seem* relies on studies in stylistics that have outlined a grammar of point of view in narrative based on the verbal system of modality (Neary 2014; Simpson 1993). The stylistic model derives from the integration of tools from narrativity and narratology (Genette 1980; Fowler 1996; Uspensky 1973) on the one hand and from systemic functional linguistics (Halliday 2004; Thompson 2004) on the other hand.

4. Multiple and layered meanings of *seem*

According to the *OED*, the verb *seem* comes from Middle English *semen*, "to appear to be," "be fitting," which corresponds to Old Norse *sæma*, "to honour," *sæmr*, "fitting," and *samr*, "same"

¹ References are from the following editions: Munro, Alice, 1997, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, Toronto, Penguin; Munro, Alice, 2015, *Lives of Girls and Women*, London, Vintage.

(de Haan 2007, 138; Johansson 2001, 233). Contemporary studies on *seem*-patterns have acknowledged the “multiple” meanings of *seem* (Aijmer 2009, 65) suggested by these etymological roots.

First, *seem* can encode the semantic system of appearance. As such, it is an evidential marker, as it reveals the observational source of information.

- (1) [Laird] seemed young and obedient again (Munro 1997, 124).

In this evidential usage (1), the emphasis is on how Laird is perceived through the subjective filter of his older sister, acting as both the narrator and focaliser in the story “Boys and Girls.” Second, *seem* may hedge probability, that is, it may temper a proposition. In this epistemic role, it expresses the speaker’s commitment to the truth of the assertion or its degree of certainty.

- (2) Once or twice I said, ‘Well I don’t know I didn’t see that game,’ but after a while I decided just to say ‘Hm hmm,’ and that seemed to be all that was necessary (Munro 1997, 162).

In this epistemic usage (2), the focus is on the tempered validity of the answer the protagonist of “Red Dress—1946” offers to Raymond Bolting, a classmate who dances with her at the Prom. Third, *seem* indicates hearsay (Aijmer 2009, 64), that is, general or shared knowledge. As such, it realises an intersubjective function, as in the following:

- (3) He was now, it seemed, the owner of a hotel (Munro 2001, 20).

This intersubjective usage (3), taken from a later story by Munro, primarily frames the information about hotel ownership as deriving from hearsay.

While instances (1), (2) and (3) may be classified as predominantly evidential, epistemic, or intersubjective, each includes all three types of semantic implicature. This corroborates Aijmer’s assumption that the meanings of *seem* are not only “multiple” but also “coexisting or layered” (Aijmer 2009, 65).

In order to explore these three strands of meaning, this work acknowledges Aijmer’s claim that “[t]here appears to be a strong correlation between the meanings or functions of the verb and the syntactic frames it can occur in” (2009, 64). In this vein, the next section presents multiple *seem*-patterns in the stories.

5. Results: *seem*-patterns

After illustrating the multiple and layered meanings of verb *seem*, this section presents the following *seem*-patterns in the two volumes of short stories: *seem* + AdjP/NP, *seem* + to infinitive VP, *seem that*, *seem like*, *seem as if*, and parenthetical *seem*. Overall, the two collections feature 180 *seem*-patterns (*Dance*: 81; *Lives*: 99).

5.1 *seem* + AdjP/NP

In this first construction, which accounts for 40% of total occurrences, *seem* is followed by an adjective or noun phrase and is formally similar to a copula, i.e., similar to the verb ‘is’ in a nominal predicate (Aijmer 2009, 80; Johansson 2001, 224). In Systemic Functional Grammar, it is thus a relational process of attribution (Halliday 2014, 269; Johnson 2010, 293) and operates like *to look like* in expressing appearance:

- (4) ‘No older than Del here,’ said Mr Chamberlain, with a disgust that in him seemed faintly fraudulent (Munro 2015, 192).

In this excerpt from “Lives of Girls and Women,” Del is describing the fake expression of disgust on Mr Chamberlain’s face, as he reports being offered a girl in Italy by her own father.

Appearance, however, is based on direct perception or experience (evidentiality). Thus, *seem* encodes inference on the basis of perceptual evidence (Johnson 2010, 293). As Aijmer sustains (2009, 72), evidential *seem* expresses a reaction (belief or opinion that something may be the case) to a phenomenon or stimulus (visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory). *Seem* would operate, then, like a mental process of perception (Halliday 2004, 246; Johnson 2010, 293):

- (5) From such a vantage point [of the aunts], my mother did seem a wild-woman (Munro 2015, 81).

In this sentence from the story “Princess Ida,” *seem* signals inference by the focalisers: it conveys the biased viewpoint of the aunts, who steadily criticise Del’s mother. As Biber et al. argue, *seem* is used to “characterise the subject predicative as a perception that is not necessarily accurate” (1999, 447). According to the *OED*, appearance (rather than fact) is also given (and, in this case, reinforced) by the past tense: “where the verb is in the past tense, there is usually [...] the notion of *mere* appearance as opposed to fact.”

5.2 *seem like*

This second pattern configures *seem* colligated with *like*. The copular simile (Johnson 2010, 292) is adopted in only 2.2% of *seem*-instances in the corpus. The relational attributive meaning resembles *to look like, to appear*:

- (6) And so after a few minutes the performance begins to seem, in spite of its innocence, like a trick—a very successful and diverting one, of course, but perhaps—how can it be said—perhaps not altogether *in good taste* (Munro 1997, 226, emphasis in the original).

The simile in (6) (i.e., the performance is like a trick) enables the narrator to express the pervasive “atmosphere of awkwardness and clumsiness” (Hrisonopulo 2014, 66) in “Dance of the Happy Shades,” regardless of the apparent innocence and success of the concert organised by the music teacher Miss Marsalles.

5.3 *seem + infinitive VP*

The second most frequent pattern in the corpus, *seem* + infinitive VP accounts for 33.3% of total occurrences. This “catenative form” (Johansson 2001, 225) relies on *seem* as auxiliary and has a hedging function. The phrase *seem* + infinitive VP “has developed into a general hedging device by means of which the speaker can express [...] reservations or doubts about the truth of the assertion” (Aijmer 2009, 76). However, it may also signal direct sensory perception with low epistemic modality or, alternatively, comparison, similarity, approximation. The following excerpt epitomises olfactory sensory perception, as well as hedging:

- (7) Some of the smell in the house seemed to come from her (Munro 1997, 50).

The male protagonist and narrator of “Thanks for the Ride,” George, is here identifying an old woman as the possible, though not certain, origin of the smell he perceives.

5.4 *it seems that*

This pattern is adopted in 21.1% of total occurrences and also operates as an adverbial hedge reducing the certainty expressed in the assertion (Aijmer 2009, 76). However, the Mood adjunct *it seems that* projects primarily subjective and intersubjective meanings. As a hearsay marker, it can indeed indicate an intersubjective meaning or shared or general knowledge, similar to *it is said that* (Aijmer 2019, 78). As such (as *shared*), it expresses a higher degree of possibility and probability (Aijmer 2009, 78), as in the following:

- (8) The place had become fixed, impregnable, all its accumulations necessary, until it seemed that even the wash-tubs, mops, couch springs and stacks of old police magazines on the back porch were there to stay (Munro 1997, 22).

An excerpt from “The Shining Houses,” instance (8) describes Mrs. Fullerton’s house, a bizarre and messy space the new bourgeois neighbours wish to get rid of. Since the experiencer is absent, the *it* pronoun before the verb *seemed* performs a function of “subjectification” (Hrisonopulo 2014, 64) and adds an effect of “alienation” and “estrangement” related to the stance-taker (Simpson 1993, 62). Hence, focalisation here is not restricted to the protagonist Mary: it includes a belief shared by the community members about the permanent presence of “the wash-tubs, mops, couch springs and stacks of old police magazines on the back porch.”

The pattern may, differently, embed an adjective, such as *probable*, *possible*, *evident*, *likely*, *inconceivable* (*it seems* + Adj. + *that*). As Aijmer (2009) observes, this form combines an evidential pattern (*seem*) with an epistemic form (*possible*). An example is the following passage from “The Flats Road”:

- (9) Why was it that the plain back wall of home, the pale chipped brick, the cement platform outside the kitchen door, washtubs hanging on nails, the pump, the lilac bush with brown-spotted leaves, should make it seem doubtful that a woman would really send her husband’s torso, wrapped in Christmas paper, by mail to his friend in South Carolina? (Munro 2015, 7)

The protagonist Del has just admitted her passion for Uncle Benny’s weekly newspapers. Articles report macabre events, like the one about the husband’s torso, with a sensational style and a morbid obsession for details. On her way back home, traces of real life begin to erode the exaggerated tone of the articles. Del reacts to the visual stimulus “the plain back wall of home ...” by questioning the certainty of the content of the articles.

5.5 *it seems as if*

This rare pattern in the corpus accounts for only 1.7% of total instances and operates as a clausal simile (Johnson 2010, 292). Its meaning is close to that of (d) (Aijmer 2009, 78) and indicates hedging. The following excerpt from “Baptizing” describes Del’s psychological turbulence during a religious ceremony, after a mysterious young boy moves close to her and puts his hand on the back of a chair, very close to her own hand:

- (10) Then it seemed as if all sensation in my body, all hope, life, potential, flowed down

into that one hand (Munro 2015, 267).

Clearly, the feelings the protagonist is describing are subjective. However, the *it-seemed-as-if*-pattern makes them generalised, almost objective, through an ironic strategy of exaggeration.

5.6 Parenthetical seem

With reference to word order, the *OED* presents a marked *seem*-pattern, either in middle or final position. This parenthetical form has an evidential function, with the sense “so I am informed,” or “as it appears from rumour or report” (*OED*).

As for frequency, the parenthetical *seem*-form only accounts for 2.2% of total instances. However, the meaning it expresses in the corpus is never intersubjective, but evidential, as in the following:

(11) Anything that wanted to, it seemed, might happen now (Munro 2015, 172).

The narrator of “Changes and Ceremonies” is describing a vibrant and vital operetta held at Del’s school, where people look unusually bright, thrilled, and bold. That situation makes Del think that anything might happen. Parenthetical *seem* in mid-position and absence of a first-person reflector add a general value to the character’s impression (‘anything might happen now’), but the source of knowledge is still subjective. To sum up, Table 1 shows the distribution of the multiple forms of the verb *seem* in the two collections by Alice Munro.

<i>Seem</i>-pattern	%
<i>Seem</i> + AdjP/NP	40
<i>Seem like</i>	2.2
<i>Seem</i> + infinitive VP	32.8
It <i>seems that</i>	21.1
<i>Seem as if</i>	1.7
Parenthetical <i>seem</i>	2.2

Tab. 1: *Seem*-patterns in the corpus

To sum up, data show that the most frequent construction in the corpus is *seem* + AdjP/NP, followed by *seem* + infinitive VP. The third option is *it seems that*. Parenthetical *seem*, *seem like*

and *seem as if* are infrequent. Accordingly, the meaning of *seem* in the corpus is predominantly evidential and only secondly epistemic. Section 5 focuses on the co-presence of *seem* and experiencer, thus referring to the sub-corpus.

6. The focaliser phrase

Notably, all the *seem*-patterns illustrated so far may co-occur with or without an explicit agent (e.g., *to me*). The presence of the indirect object pronoun after the *seem*-verb, in 22% of the total corpus, signals subjectivity. The explicit agent expresses the direct experiencer of the phenomenon, in the form of impression:

- (12) The word *girl* had formerly seemed to me innocent and unburdened, like the word child; now it appeared that it was no such thing (Munro 1997, 121).

The unnamed, first-person narrator of “Boys and Girls” is reflecting on the gender roles and limits imposed on her, as an eleven-year-old girl, by her family members and by the small-town community she belonged to.

Generally (92% of occurrences), the first-person singular is used for the experiencer; sometimes it takes the third-person singular or plural. In the short story “Lives of Girls and Women,” the following instance epitomises the intersubjective function of *it seems*, as clarified by the plural and generalised reflector ‘to everybody else’:

- (13) Don’t you ever think a person wants to die, just because it seems to everybody else they have got no reason to go on living (Munro 2015, 210).

Where the object expressed or implied is not in the first person, the *OED* describes a sense of appearance (rather than fact).

In a literary text, the subjectivity pattern can signal the focaliser (or reflector), the character and/or the narrator. In the following instances, *to me* expresses both the narrator and the focaliser:

- (14) It seemed to me she would do this simply out of perversity, and to try her power (Munro 2001, 120).

The pattern *it seems to me* in (14) signifies something like a mental process. The reader is offered the protagonist's thoughts about the maternal motivations for the woman's unpleasant behaviour. Table 2 shows the distribution of *seem*-patterns + focaliser in the two collections:

<i>Seem</i>-pattern	%
<i>Seem</i> + AdjP/NP	35.8
<i>Seem</i> like	2.6
<i>Seem</i> + infinitive VP	12.8
It <i>seems</i> that	41.1
<i>Seem</i> as if	-
Paranetical <i>seem</i>	7.7

Tab. 2: The sub-corpus: *seem*-patterns + focaliser

Textual evidence shows that the reflector predominantly co-occurs with the *seem-that* form (41.1%), followed by *seem* + AdjP/NP patterns (35,8%). Interestingly, the co-occurrence of *seem* + infinitive VP and focaliser is not frequent (12.8%). If we read these data with reference to previous figures on the frequency of diverse patterns in the total corpus, we notice that the *seem-that* pattern shows a growth of 20.1% (from 21% in the total corpus to 41.1% in the reflector sub-corpus). This creates a semantic tension between the *it*-marker of subjectification and the marker of subjectivity *to me*. The opposite tendency characterises the *seem* + infinitive VP pattern, which shows a decrease from 33% in the general corpus to 12% in the reflector sub-corpus (-19%), as if to preserve its predominantly epistemic function, not necessarily related to the reflector. Meanwhile, the *seem* + AdjP/NP is rather stable, with a difference of -5% between the total corpus (40%) and the sub-corpus (35%). This pattern is confirmed in its predominant evidential and subjective function. The following section discusses the data from a narrative and stylistic viewpoint.

7. Discussion

Formal and functional variation of the verb *seem* in Alice Munro's stories has clear narrative and stylistic implicatures. In this section, its function will be inscribed within the conceptualisation and configuration of a grammar of narrative point of view (Simpson 1993; Neary 2014). Viewpoint indicates the perspective within which events and thoughts are narrated. A further distinction is adopted, between the entity designating the storyteller, the

narrator (who tells the story), and the entity designating the viewer, the focaliser (who sees the story). In a first-person narrative, these two stances conflate, whereas in a third-person narrative they are distinct.

The majority of the stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades* (12 out of 15) and all the stories in *Lives of Girls and Women* feature a first-person narrator. Positioned within the narrative space, this stance is variously labelled as “homodiegetic narrator” (Genette 1980), or “internal narrator” (Uspensky 1973; Fowler 1996). In this case, the narrator is also the protagonist, as well as the focaliser, whose subjective viewpoint is offered to the reader. This configuration is verbally constructed using *I* as a personal pronoun and, in *seem*-patterns, the indirect personal pronoun *to me*.

How does the verb *seem* enable the reader to access the internal world of the character and narrator? While Systemic Functional Grammar labels the *seem*-verb as a relational process of attribution (Halliday 2014, 269; Johnson 2010, 293; Thompson 2004), specialised literature envisages that it can also express meanings enacted by mental processes of cognition or perception. Mental processes of cognition are mainly related to thinking and remembering, thus involving the temporal dimension. Mental processes of perception are generally related to a sensorial form of perception, primarily sight, but also auditory, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory perception (Halliday 2004, 256). The distinction between cognitive and perceptual processes is addressed in the following paragraphs.

Sometimes, the narrator tells her story many years after the events actually occurred. This narrative stance signals a temporal gap, acquired maturity, emotional detachment, and some memory gaps that problematise the narrator-character relationship. This is visible in the quote from “Boys and Girls” used in the title of this paper: “it seemed to me it might be true.” As a marker of subjectivity, the indirect object pronoun signals the position of the eleven-year-old focaliser. The verb *seem* expresses the focaliser’s and character’s epistemic stance to the perception of truth at the time of the events being told. From a narrative viewpoint, the propositional value of the truth is modulated by both a) the temporal gap between the adult narrator and the young protagonist, and b) the perceptual and cognitive limits of her eleven-year-old self.

Temporal tension is also visible in the following sentence from “The Office,” when the protagonist reports on her past need for an office for her “to write in” (Munro 1997, 60).

(15) Perhaps at bottom it seemed to me too improper a wish to be granted (Munro 1997, 62).

The pattern *it seemed to me* indicates a cognitive mental process, as revealed by the circumstantial “at bottom,” with reference to her inner thoughts, both profound and authentic. The thematised “[p]erhaps,” however, hedges the validity of the proposition (Simpson 1993, 55): this low-modality marker seems to project the narrator’s present consciousness onto an interpretation of her past thoughts.

If memory enacts engagement with past events, situations and thoughts, multisensoriality operates as a privileged format for the perception and knowledge of reality in Munro’s early stories. Sight, smell, touch, taste, hearing are recurrently evoked throughout the pages and enable characters to experience and engage with reality (Francesconi 2015). The following instances epitomise the interconnection between *seem*-patterns and multisensoriality:

- (16) I used to see him on the street and he seemed old to me then, at least old the way almost everybody grown-up did (Munro 1997, 133-134).
- (17) The noise the river made was not loud but deep, and seemed to come from away down in the middle of it, some hidden place where the water issues with a roar from underground (Munro 1997, 37).

The first instance signals that, at the time of the story (*used to, then*), the protagonist used to visually perceive (*to see*) the man as old. As a result of perceptual evidence, the protagonist encodes her opinion. In the second instance, the narrator is describing a noise in terms of its provenance, and her inference as a result of aural perception (*to hear*). A third example may be found in (7), where perception occurs through the sensorial channel of smelling. Tellingly, the following instance shows an intersensorial perceptive process:

- (18) The sun had clouded over about noon but it seemed the day got even hotter then (Munro 1997, 182).

In this instance from “A Trip to the Coast,” the verb *seem* marks a tension (“but”) between the visual perception of clouds in the sky and the impression that temperatures got hotter. The tactile-related inference contradicts the visual stimulus.

Multisensorially perceived, filtered through the *seem*-verb, reality is represented as blurred and fluid, opaque and ungraspable. This is consistent with previous research on Munro’s style. In her socio-semiotic exploration of the language of colour in Juliet’s trilogy, Francesconi (2017b) observes that colours are often captured in their modulated (*yellowish-white, reddish-brown*), mixed (*blue-green, blue-black*), and transitory nature (*redden, go gray*). Munro also uses the

marker *or*, as in this instance: “Irene’s eyes were green or blue” (Munro 2006, 91), where the narrator expresses his/her limits and uncertainties as for the visual perception and narrative representation of the colour.

Just as the *seem*-pattern enables the narrator to express uncertainties, it can also shape his/her estrangement. According to Hrisonopulo (2014, 64), the *it* pronoun found in patterns like *it seems that* does not indicate the narrator in a literary text, but his/her schematic mental picture. The narrator is an implicit rather than explicit stance-taker and his/her visibility is backgrounded. This anticipatory *it* is, thus, a marker of subjectification (implicit positioning of the narrator). Following the Russian scholar, *it seems* may be perceived as a form of “narratorial estrangement” (Hrisonopulo 2014, 65), performed by the internal narrator. The frequent co-occurrence with the reflector in this pattern creates a semantic tension between subjectification and subjectivity. The interconnection of hedging and estrangement makes the position of the narrator less stable and the viewpoint less neat.

In this vein, Munro’s pervasive use of polymorphic and polysemic *seem*-patterns contributes to the creation of what Neary, after Simpson, defines as “negative modal shading” (2014, 183), related to “a reader’s uncertainty as to the ‘facticity’ of the events, actions, or characters described” (Neary 2014, 183). Deriving from previous frameworks for the inspection of homodiegetic/internal point of view in narrative (Genette 1980; Uspensky 1973; Fowler 1996), Simpson’s A narratives may provide a fitting definition for Munro’s early stories. If Category-A narratives include stories where the narrator is conflated with the participating character in the story, they can be further divided according to their modal shading: positive (+ve), neutral, or negative (–ve) (Simpson 1993, 50). Specifically, –ve shading derives from the verbal deployment of low epistemic modality and the verb *seem* is consistent with Simpson’s category A–ve (Simpson 1993, 95).

This positioning is in line with previous studies. In her inspection of linguistic modality in Munro, Somacarrera (1996) argues that the predominant system she identifies is that of epistemic possibility. Accordingly, the narrator expresses a low degree of confidence in the truth of an expressed proposition via modal adverbs like *perhaps*, *maybe*, or modal auxiliary verbs like *would*, *might*, or expressions with negative polarity, such as, *she could not tell if, she did not know, she could not remember*.

To sum up, the verb *seem* significantly contributes to the enactment of the system of epistemic possibility in Munro’s stories, as well as to the shaping of a A–ve category. However, it deserves a unique position within Munro’s art of indeterminacy, due to its polymorphic and polysemic nature. As the analysis has revealed, the verb floats among attributive, cognitive and perceptual

functions, as well as between evidential and epistemic values. As such, it questions and blurs categories of factuality, clarity, and stability.

8. Conclusion

This work has examined formal and functional variation of the verb *seem* in Alice Munro's early stories. The semantics of the *seem*-verb class has been explored through the multiple forms it presents. Patterns of polarity, tense, modality, and word order have also been acknowledged to contribute to *seem*-based grammar systems. Being an identifying attributive process, *seem* can represent inferences deriving from a mental process of cognition, frequently related to the semantic field of remembrance, or perception, and generally of multisensorial nature. The textual evidence shows that multiple meanings often coexist and intertwine in Munro's stories: a predominant evidential system (semantic system of appearance) and a significant epistemic system (weak epistemic meaning).

Overall, the verb *seem* is a linguistic marker that reveals point of view as never clear and neat but blurred and fuzzy. Within a grammar of point of view, *seem* encodes the analysed short stories within Simpson's A-ve category, that is first-person accounts based on uncertain and unstable focalisers and narrators. It seems to me that, in these early stories, Munro's 'art of indeterminacy' is grounded in subjectivity and is related to the limits of perception and of remembrance of focalisers. Textual evidence shows that epistemic uncertainty is embedded within evidentiality.

Meant as a pilot study, this work is limited in several ways, mostly in terms of extent. The next stage will address all Munro's fourteen collections published from 1968 to 2012, through a software-based inspection. This will enable me to carry out a detailed compilation, to map all the occurrences of *seem* and to explore the distribution of *seem*-patterns across the collections. At this point, I should clarify that narrative point of view is never unique and rigid (Neary 2014, 187). Monolithic and stable perspectives would create a static narrative, with low potential for reader involvement. Narrative perspective is, instead, a varied and dynamic element; multiple, shifting, floating viewpoints interact within a literary work. In this vein, diachronic variation in the use of *seem* patterns will be read in light of observations regarding the progressive shift in Munro from first-person to third-person narrative, the growing detachment of her tone and her style. My hypothesis is that epistemic uncertainty, in later stories by Munro, becomes more pervasive: it does not only reflect the focaliser's perspective, but increasingly that of the narrator as well. Checking this hypothesis is also within the scope of future work.

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Sabrina Francesconi is Associate Professor of English Linguistics at the University of Trento. Her research interests include stylistics, adaptation studies, tourism and heritage discourses, humour studies, multimodal and genre analysis. She has recently published the monographic volume *A Multimodal Stylistic Approach to Screen Adaptations of the Work of Alice Munro* (Routledge, 2023).

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