

Altered States of Consciousness in M. Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

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Abstract. This paper focuses on revealing distinctive features of literary representation of altered states of consciousness (ASC) in the novel *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje. For this purpose, we developed the taxonomy of ASC represented in the novel and studied the established groups of these states by means of linguostylistic analysis coupled with cognitive approach to literary semantics. The results obtained showed that each type of ASC has its own linguistic and narrative features of manifestation. Application of cognitive analysis allowed us to gain a better understanding of cognitive basis of the representation of ASC.

Key words: *altered states of consciousness (ASC), types of ASC, semantic and cognitive analysis, linguostylistic analysis.*

Introduction. A radical shift in understanding the correlation between mind and language, cognition and emotion, metaphor and thinking has given fresh impetus to the development of cognitive studies in literature. An important assumption shared by the majority of representatives of contemporary philology is that studying literary semantics and a narrative structure can offer new insights into the way we perceive and process information, make inferences about other people's behaviour and emotions, as well as reflect on concepts related to mind and mental states. The power of literature and art in general is believed to be not only in their ability to engage interest and entertain but to provide an alternative way to grasp the inner and outer worlds and to render ineffable experience, in other words, experience beyond verbal comprehension and expression. A good example of this can be altered states of consciousness (hereinafter referred to as ASC), since they are accompanied by the feeling of ineffability [1, p. 229] and the reduction of speech activity [4, p. 29-30]. At the same time, these states are closely related to the processes of creation, perception, and interpretation of verbal art [7; 6, p. 88]. Incorporating multiple codes (e.g. language, emotions, imagery, rhythm, etc) and establishing links to other art forms (e.g. imitation of music in fiction) and discourses, verbal art has potential resources for elucidation of hidden and veiled experiences as well as enjoys the power to give insights into the way we think, feel, and account for our sense perceptions. Therefore, it appears that the findings on linguistic, conceptual and preconceptual features of literary representation of ASC may have far-reaching implications for understanding the nature of these states. For this reason, the **purpose** of this paper is to delineate specific features of the literary representation of ASC on both verbal and conceptual levels. In order to achieve this aim, the following steps seem to be logical:

- singling out textual markers of ASC;
- developing a classification of altered states represented in fiction;
- outlining salient trends in ASC manifestation and comparing verbal and narrative strategies employed for the delineation of their different types;
- identifying linguistic benchmarks allowing to estimate the depth and intensity of ASC represented in fiction.

Before embarking on the analysis of ASC in the novel by M. Ondaatje *The English Patient*, it should be mentioned that literary representation of these states poses a serious challenge, since ASC predominantly have no

direct linguistic markers in literary texts and the criteria for their demarcation are fuzzy. Their textual model may therefore be elaborated only by virtue of a multidisciplinary approach, involving the findings of psychology, psychiatry, and neuroscience. In employing in this paper the term "ASC", we refer especially to a renowned psychiatrist Arnold M. Ludwig who considers altered states as mental states induced by various internal and external factors, which can be recognized by the individual himself or by an objective observer as a deviation from normal waking consciousness [1, p. 225]. Drawing upon empirical research into mind [1, p. 227-230; 5, p. 8-10] and speech of people experiencing ASC [4], the following salient features of these states can be outlined: changes in sensory thresholds, shifts in body perceptions, loss of contact with the reality, the feeling of ineffability, and alterations in linguistic performance. Another important issue related to the properties of ASC is that, in contrast to a widespread erroneous opinion, they are not associated exclusively with pathological, harmful experiences. According to A. Maslow, the higher the degree of psychological health of a person entering ASC, the richer and more intense these experiences are [2]. On the whole, ASC can perform a variety of functions ranging from maladaptive ways to solve inner conflicts [1, p. 231] to their illuminative power and therapeutic benefits [1, p. 232; 2].

Thus, for the purpose of this research, we apply an integrated approach to the analysis of linguistic representation of ASC in fiction. The above-stated results from empirical studies are taken into account while developing methodology for collecting, generalising and interpreting the data. Linguostylistic method of analysis is used in order to identify distinctive features of ASC representation on the verbal plane of the narrative, while semantic and cognitive approach to text analysis appears to be valid for elucidation of underlying cognitive patterns of ASC manifestation in fiction.

Types of ASC in M. Ondaatje's *The English Patient*.

Even a brief analysis of the verbal plane and the narrative structure of M. Ondaatje's *The English Patient* reveals its relevance to ASC. The characters of the novel are put into life-threatening circumstances both in wartime and during peacetime when dramatic and upsetting events continue to occur. The main part of the story is set at the bomb-damaged villa full of unexploded ordnance, which poses a direct and deadly threat to its dwellers. Another important storyline unfolds in the desert, an area with hostile living conditions making people struggle for survival. Besides,

the characters pursue dangerous and high-risk careers: a sapper, a military nurse, a spy, a thief. The attempts to come to grips with harsh realities of life and to relieve an excruciating pain lead to drug use and addiction. All these result in the description of a vast range of different liminal experiences. Their representation is underpinned by constant disruption of linear time, as the story is shown from the point of view of different characters; their thoughts, conversations, reminiscences are inextricably intertwined; the present action is continuously intermingled with the past events. Likewise, recurrent fluctuations in rhythm, bright sensory images dispersed throughout the story contribute to the literary simulation of the shift from normal waking state to ASC.

Pursuing the goal to classify the extracts related to the description of ASC, we turn to Arnold M. Ludwig's approach based on the assumption that changes in our normal waking state of consciousness are caused by alterations in internal and external stimulation. In the words of Arnold M. Ludwig, "There seems to be an optimal range of exteroceptive stimulation necessary for the maintenance of normal waking consciousness, and levels of stimulation either above or below this range appear conducive for the production of ASCs" [1, p. 225]. That is, five basic groups of ASC comprise the states caused by the reduction / increase of external stimulation, decrease / intensification of internal stimulation, as well as ASC induced by changes in body chemistry and neurophysiology.

The **first** group includes ASC resulting from the reduction of external stimulation caused by prolonged social and stimulus deprivation. Examples given by Arnold M. Ludwig are solitary confinement, lengthy stay in the desert or at sea, profound immobilization in a body cast, patients with cataract, etc [ibid, p. 226]. To illustrate literary representation of this type of alterations in mental states, we have chosen the extracts from the novel depicting behaviour and feelings of characters exposed to traumatic experience and stress in the desert. The symptoms of ASC delineated in *The English Patient* are as follows:

- loss of connection with the reality:

The last link with any other world was the clink of the fire-black tea urn and the long spoon and the glass which came towards us in the darkness of the mornings. [3, p. 146];

- receding and termination of speech communication, e.g. *After the third night we gave up talking.* [3, p. 146];

- impairment of reality testing, e.g. *In the desert it is easy to lose a sense of demarcation.* [3, p. 20].

Main concepts underlying the representation of this type of ASC are FATIGUE, DISORIENTATION, MUTENESS, and DROWNING.

Another example of ASC triggered by lack of external stimulation is the description of the titular character's mental states and sensations. After the plane crash his charred body was found by a tribe of desert people who healed him by placing large pieces of cloth soaked with oil on his body and face. Being thus deprived of the senses of sight and touch, having lost the ability for thermoception and proprioception (the sense of body position, motion, and balance), the English patient had to rely exclusively on hearing, smell, and taste. Furthermore, hearing was also hindered because the Bedouin "silenced

themselves when he was awake" [3, p. 6]. The paradoxicality of this type of ASC lies in the fact that the entranced person is desperately trying to connect to the reality, but more intensive acuteness of the isolated sense leads to the distorted perception of environment.

Although this type of ASC belongs to the same group as the one mentioned above, the ways of its representation in the novel *The English Patient* differ on both verbal and conceptual levels. Whereas the main focus of the delineation of ASC induced by a prolonged stay in the desert is on a direct description of physiological and psychological states of the person exposed to traumatic experience and stress, in this case readers are made to search for clues about character's inner state and their attention is primarily concentrated on sensations, perceptual distortion, and synaesthesia:

He could smell the oasis before he saw it. The liquid in the air. The rustle of things. Palms and bridles. The banging of tin cans ..." [3, p. 5]. "With the uncorking of each tiny bottle the perfumes fell out. There was an odour of the sea. The smell of rust. Indigo. Ink. River-mud arrow-wood formaldehyde paraffin ether. The tide of airs was chaotic." [3, p. 10].

A succession of nominative sentences presents a kaleidoscopic range of sensory images pertaining to the olfactory modality. The patient does not hear voices and has no ability to speak; the only source of information for him is therefore smell. Such sensory details have a considerable potential to guide readers' visualisation and evoke individual associations. Silence and muteness are part of the description of this type of ASC but, in contrast to the fragments depicting ASC caused by a prolonged stay in the desert, they are suggested implicitly. Salient concepts underlying the representation of this type of ASC are SMELL, CHAOS, VAGUENESS, and DARKNESS.

The **second** major group consists of ASC induced by the increase of exteroceptive stimulation resulting from sensory overload [1, p. 226]. One of the instances of such states provided by Arnold M. Ludwig is a trance during tribal ceremonies. The analysis of the description of ASC during ritual dances in the novel *The English Patient* revealed the following tendencies:

- the prevalence of sensory images belonging to the modality of sight and hearing, e.g. < ... > *he hears the water drawing songs of the Mzina tribe with their exultations* < ... > [3, p. 24];

- verbal imitation of music;

- intermingling of dream and reality, e.g. *Was this invented? Dreamed by him while wrapped in oil and felt in darkness?* [3, p. 24];

- constant usage of a variety of syntactic structures within a small context, which leads to the impression of the development of an emotional state from the upsurge of emotions to their gradual decline;

- reconstructed concepts underlying the representation of this type of ASC are MUSIC, FIRE, DANCE, DREAM, WATER.

The **third** kind of ASC is based on fluctuations in internal stimulation and may be triggered by what is known as hyperalertness or mental involvement [1, p. 226]. Examples provided by Arnold M. Ludwig are as follows: prolonged vigilance during sentry duty or observation of a radar screen, intense mental absorption in a task, etc [ibid, p. 226]. As an illustration of this type of ASC in *The*

English Patient, we discuss the description of Kip's emotional and mental state while dismantling a bomb. The delineation of this state drastically differs from the representation of other types of ASC in the novel under discussion. The major difference may lie in the choice of vocabulary. The bulk of words chosen by M. Ondaatje for the description of other groups of ASC belong to the semantic field of emotions whereas the keywords elicited from the fragments describing Kip's mental state during bomb disposal are predominantly vocational words that spell out the intricacies of his job. In this case, literary modelling of a trance-like state relies more on variations in sentence length and sentence combining techniques rather than on vocabulary choice. Compound and complex sentences are used for the detailed explanation of sapper's work making thus the description more realistic whereas simple sentences and elliptical constructions create the atmosphere of tension and render the idea of hyperalertness, i.e. the feeling that accompanies activities involving prolonged extreme concentration.

Another eye-catching detail pertinent to the delineation of this type of trance is reference to music as a powerful trigger of such states, e.g. *When he worked, clarity and music filled him, the human world extinguished* [3, p. 120]. Continuous flow of auditory input evokes the state of absorption, objects and events in the outside world gradually fade away, while the focus of attention is solely on the challenging task.

The **fourth group** of ASC includes the states occurring under the influence of alterations in inner stimulation as a result of "decreased alertness or relaxation of critical faculties" [1, p. 226]. According to Arnold M. Ludwig, this group comprises a wide range of trances, e.g. mystical, transcendental or revelatory states attained through passive meditation, daydreaming, drowsing; profound aesthetic experience, and reading trance [ibid, 227]. The latter is salient for *The English Patient*, since the description of reading process and characters' impressions evoked by their engrossment in books is one of the key strategies employed for implicit characterisation in the novel. The only thing left after the accident with the patient is a copy of Herodotus's *The Histories* marked throughout with his notes. Listening to the book brings back vivid and detailed memories about his desert explorations and his beloved. This shabby book is therefore a thin thread connecting the patient with his past. In a similar vein, reading is the source that gives insight into psychology and motivation of another central character, Hana.

Semantic, stylistic, and conceptual methods of analysis applied to the fragments from *The English Patient* revealed the following marked tendencies in the representation of reader's trance:

- reading fiction is shown as a triple process: entering an altered state, experiencing it, returning to reality:

She entered the story knowing she would emerge from it feeling she had been immersed in the lives of others, in plots that stretched back twenty years, her body full of sentences and moments, as if awaking from sleep with a heaviness caused by unremembered dreams. [3, p. 13]

- recurrence and similar patterns of ASC induced by reading fiction (e.g. *experience that is known, similar emotions*);

- properties of ASC elicited from the analysis of the excerpts under study are concurrent with those obtained from psychological experiments: loss of connection with the reality; shifts in body perceptions (e.g. *her body full of sentences and moments*); identity changes, e.g. identification with the characters, the feeling of being inside a story (e.g. *When she begins a book she enters through stilted doorways into large courtyards. Parma and Paris and India spread their carpets.*);

- the portrayal of the alterations in mental states caused by reading is accompanied by the feeling of losing touch with the reality and entering a different world (e.g. *<...> that she had entered the room and then the corporeal body had disappeared.*) [3, p. 13];

- concepts underlying their representation are ENTERING, IMMERSION, ESCAPE, TRAVELLING, DREAM, DRINKING.

The comparison of verbal and narrative strategies used for literary representation of reading trance with those employed for the description of other types of ASC testifies to substantial differences between them. Entering this state is shown as a familiar and conscious process with a slightly diminished level of awareness, e.g. *She entered the story knowing she would emerge from it <... >* [3, p. 13]. Other types of trance-like states are delineated as more spontaneous ones and are characterised by a significant decline of awareness. While the depiction of trances in the previous cases is mainly grounded on simple sentences, which conveys the sense of confusion, disorganised thinking, free and uncontrolled stream of images, as well as an upsurge of emotions, the representation of mental states over the course of reading is characterised by the usage of complex, compound, and compound-complex sentences logically linked to each other by a rich variety of conjunctions. The deliberate choice of this syntactic structure results in the effect of logical flow of thoughts. Besides, fictional worlds described as part of reading trance seem to have nothing contradicting the reality, because the setting corresponds to the events described and the plot is logically arranged. It allows us to conclude that ASC induced by reading are shown in the novel as light trances, partially controlled by the person experiencing them.

The **fifth group** of ASC includes the states occurring under the influence of various somatopsychological factors [1, p. 227]. As stated by Arnold M. Ludwig, they may result from hypo/hyperglycaemia, dehydration, the administration of drugs, etc. [ibid, p. 227]. This group is represented in *The English Patient* as the description of drug-induced ASC. Let us consider one of the examples:

He glares out, each eye a path, down the long bed at the end of which is Hana. After she has bathed him she breaks the tip off an ampoule and turns to him with the morphine. An effigy. A bed. He rides the boat of morphine. It races in him, imploding time and geography the way maps compress the world onto a two-dimensional sheet of paper. [3, p. 171].

As can be seen from the fragment describing mental states of the English patient sedated by morphine, entering trance is represented as a sudden break with reality when rational reasoning gives way to hallucinations. Random thoughts are intertwined with reminiscences and manifold associations. The manifestation of ASC is grounded on the flashes of disconnected verbal images.

This effect is similarly intensified through syntactic arrangement based on constant interchange between short nominative sentences and longer extended sentences. The absence of formal connectors between the sentences contributes to the feeling of abruptness, losing touch with the outside world, and turn to inner view.

The main symptoms of drug-induced ASC represented in *The English Patient* are:

- changes in thinking patterns resulting in disconnection from the outside world and focus on inner feelings;
- hallucinations, e.g.

<...> *he must get out of this desert, its architecture of morphine. He needs to pull away from the invisible road to El Taj.* [3, p. 267];

- distorted perception of time and space, e.g. *It races in him, imploding time and geography* <...> [3, p. 171]

- alterations in body image;

- changes in meaning, e.g. *Now that his mind is light and exact with the drug,* <...> [3, p. 87].

The delineation of these states draws heavily on complex imagery, in particular extended metaphors while the description of other types of ASC is grounded on direct sensory details evoking images of familiar tangible objects. Another important facet of the manifestation of drug-induced ASC is an intricate and appropriate syntactic arrangement. The interchange of various syntactic patterns enhances the effect of chaotic mixture of associations, as well as creates the underlying rhythm apt for serving as a linguistic background for the simulation of alterations in mental states. All this contributes to the representation of drug-induced ASC as the most intensive trance leading to the complete loss of touch with the reality.

Concluding remarks. The obtained results suggest that literary discourse can offer an alternative way for grasping ASC. Even though literary representation does not necessarily show the full range of formal characteristics of ASC, insights into their manifestation in fiction can reveal more about our subjective perception of these states. Properties of ASC established from the analysis of the excerpts under study are in agreement with those obtained from psychological experiments: loss of connection with the reality, shifts in body perceptions, identity changes, etc. The taxonomy of ASC represented in fiction developed in accordance with the criteria suggested by Arnold M. Ludwig facilitates elucidation of common and distinctive features of different types of ASC. Though ASC represented in fiction share the majority of their properties, they definitely differ in their manifestation, depth, and intensity.

Despite being mainly associated with non-verbal experiences and appearing to be linguistically opaque, ASC represented in fiction tend to reveal themselves through recurrent verbal patterns based on specific syntactic arrangement and intrinsic imagery. Syntax appears to be one of the most important means for modelling ASC in fiction. Variations in sentence length and appropriate usage of conjunctions establish different kinds of rhythm imitating thus the changes in reality perception, e.g. time retardation or acceleration. Expressive and evocative images related to ASC represented in *The English Patient* fall into two major groups: sensory details and a complex set of extended metaphors. The image structure seems to be a benchmark for judging about the levels of depth of ASC. More research is also needed to develop valid semantic criteria accounting for the depth and intensity of ASC represented in fiction.

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Измененные состояния сознания в романе М. Ондатже “Английский пациент”

Л. Ф. Присяжнюк

Аннотация. Статья посвящена анализу измененных состояний сознания (ИСС) в романе М. Ондатже “Английский пациент”. Опираясь на эмпирические исследования в области психологии, психиатрии и психолингвистики, автор статьи предлагает алгоритм выделения и анализа таких состояний сознания в художественном тексте. Классификация выделенных фрагментов, содержащих описание ИСС, проводится на основе критериев, предложенных известным психиатром, пионером в области изучения ИСС, А. М. Людвигом. Особенности художественного воплощения каждого из выделенных типов ИСС изучаются с помощью семантико-когнитивного и лингвостилистического методов анализа.

Ключевые слова: измененные состояния сознания (ИСС), типология ИСС, семантико-когнитивный анализ, лингвостилистический анализ.