

Allen Riddell & Karina van Dalen-Oskam

Reader roles and the literary field: analyzing the results of a large survey

The research project The Riddle of Literary Quality investigates whether a correlation can be found between the opinions that readers have of a book and the formal features (the style) of that book. The project deals with a corpus of 401 recent novels in Dutch or translated into Dutch. The opinions about these novels are gathered through an online survey presented to a (paid) representative panel of citizens of the Netherlands and also made openly available online for anyone reading Dutch. In total, 13,782 respondents completed the survey. The data gathered will be made available after the project's end. In this paper, we will not go into a stylistic analysis of the novels. We will focus on the data we gathered through the survey and we will show what kind of questions we are trying to answer with some of the data and how we approach these questions.

For our research we want to verify whether the nature of the gathered evaluations of literary value correlates with (1) the educational background and (2) the personal/individual needs of the reader. This leads to two main research questions: (1) can we find a correlation between the level of education of a reader and her/his judgements of literariness of novels; and (2) is there evidence that readers may have different reading roles depending on their specific needs as a reader.

The first question builds on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who in his book *Distinction* and elsewhere presented evidence for the fact that (for the respondents in his surveys) a person's cultural tastes have a statistical correlation with their level of education and their social position (their position in the occupational class structure). Using the results of the Dutch 2013 online survey we will try to verify by statistical means (Poisson regression) whether a respondent's level of education and/or income can be used to predict the degree to which a respondent reads books which are judged to be of high literary quality (by other readers).

The second question is inspired by Renate von Heydebrand & Simone Winko's work *Einfuehrung in die Wertung von Literatur. Systematik - Geschichte – Legitimation* (1996), summarized in English in their contribution to the volume *The quality of literature. Linguistic studies in literary evaluation* edited by Willie Van Peer (2008). As they state, 'Our aim was to model and analyze the process of literary evaluation in such a way as to facilitate historical and empirical studies on the foundations of literary quality in the various areas of our culture' (2008, p. 224). They posit that ideally we could distinguish between two reader roles: 'das identifikatorische und das distanzierte Lesen' (1996, p. 102), or a heteronomous and an autonomous way of reading. This continuum with two extremities: autonomous and heteronomous, strongly reminds of elements in Bourdieu's theoretical model. We will use the results of the survey data to find out whether we find evidence for one or two different reader roles, and if a pattern of two different roles shows up, we will verify whether these roles can indeed be mapped to those of the identifying and distanced reader. We will also return to our first question, finding out how well these roles can be predicted by taking into account the education level of the reader. For this, our approach is based on Item Response Theory.