A NARRATIVE GARDEN PATH IN CHRISTIE'S *MURDER IS EASY (EASY TO KILL)*[*]

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1. INTRODUCTION

Agatha Christie's detective stories are essentially of the 'whodunnit' genre, starting with one or more crimes (usually murders), bringing to the fore some suspects, introducing clues as well as red herrings, and finally revealing the perpetrator of the crime, showing that he or she had the capacity and opportunity to commit the crime, as well as tracing his or her motive. Uncovering the perpetrator is usually achieved through the agency of a lead investigator, e.g. Miss Marple, Hercule Poirot etc. Multiple suspects emerge by the gradual accumulation of small pieces of evidence. When developing her intricate plots, Christie also deploys grammatical and stylistic tools to create alternative lines of explanation (Dutta Flanders 2017, Eckardt 2024).

This paper illustrates Christie's use of referential ambiguity as a tool in developing the plotline. It is illustrated on the basis of one work, *Murder is Easy,* which appeared also as *Easy to Kill,* the printed version used here is by Phoenix publishing. Christie creates a narrative garden path by introducing an ambiguity of reference at some point. One of its interpretations is a clue and the second is a red herring. She ensures that the reader entertains the inappropriate 'red herring' interpretation of the referential ambiguity till the moment of *denouement*. The narrative garden path is created by the grammatical device of subject omission in spoken English.

The grammatical pattern will first be introduced briefly and set against the more general background of agent demoting devices, after which Christie's use of subject omission and its implications for the development of the plotline will be considered in detail. The pivotal line that creates the narrative garden path and which is the focus of the current discussion is one that interpreted correctly provides a clue to the identification of the perpetrator of the crime, in particular as a signifier of their capacity for killing, and connects directly to the killer's motive for the murders. The alternative reading is a red herring. At various places along the plot line, the line is repeated with conflicting readings maintaining the ambiguity and postponing the *dénouement*.

Given the nature of the discussion, this paper contains spoilers for the story discussed.

[*] This paper is for Genoveva, student, colleague and friend. I hope it shows that now, after retirement, one can still engage in linguistics and discover horizons. Or, as our colleague Greg Polletta once said to me: 'Out of the ratrace, into the sunshine'.

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2. GRAMMAR AND IMPLIED AGENTS IN ENGLISH

2.1. Passive voice and agent demotion

English has various grammatical strategies for not overtly expressing the agent of an activity, thus leaving it open who is responsible for the act encoded. Typically, the passive pattern can serve this function: in active (1a), the agent of *killed* is overtly expressed by the subject, the nominal *Gordon,* in passive (1b) the agent is left implicit. Motivations for agent omission vary: either the agent is assumed to be known, or it is irrelevant.

(1) a. Gordon killed the bird last night.
b. The bird was killed last night.

Though the agent of *was killed* is not overt in (1b), it is clearly implied, witness the fact that the agent can be modified by agent-oriented adverbial modifiers such as *deliberately* in (1c). Deliberateness is predicated of the implied agent.

(1) c. The bird was killed deliberately.

The passive demoted agent differs syntactically from an agent encoded by the grammatical subject in that in the latter case the subject nominal controls finite agreement and can also serve as the antecedent for a floating quantifier such as *all*, which is not possible for the demoted agent in the passive.

(2) a. The hunters have/*has killed the bird.
b. The bird *have/has been killed (by the hunters).
c. The hunters have all killed one bird.
d. The bird was (*all) killed (by the hunters).
e. The birds were all killed by the hunters.

In (2a) the agent is expressed by the plural subject nominal *the hunters* and controls agreement on the finite auxiliary. In (2b) the agent is demoted: regardless of whether it is overt or implicit (as indicated by the parentheses), the agent no longer controls agreement. Rather, the patient of the active sentence, the nominal *the bird*, has been promoted to grammatical subject and controls agreement. In the active version, the grammatical subject *the hunters* can serve as the antecedent to a quantifier in mid-position (2c), here *all*. The demoted plural agent in the passive (2d) is no longer able to control the quantifier *all* and the singular subject *the bird* does not allow modification by *all*, which requires a plural. As shown in (2e), a plural subject, *the birds* can control the quantifier. In (2e) *all* cannot be taken to modify *the hunters*: (2e) is read as (2f) and not as (2g):

(2) f. All the birds were killed by the hunters.
g. The birds were killed by all the hunters.

2.2. Subject omission in finite clauses

2.2.1. *Second conjunct subject omission (SCSO)*

Though English finite clauses usually have an overt subject (nominal or pronominal), there are contexts in which subject omission is possible. One such case is illustrated in (3) in which the

subject of a second conjunct (here *I*) can be omitted. There is a categorical coreference condition on the omission of the subject of the second conjunct: in (3d), for instance, the pronoun *they* can only be omitted provided it is coreferential with the pronominal subject *they* in the first conjunct. So, for instance, a subject pronoun *I* or a non-coreferential *they* cannot be omitted. Similarly, in (3e), *he* can be omitted iff coreferential with the same pronoun in the first conjunct, but *I* cannot be elided. Therefore, the omission of the pronoun does not lead to any referential ambiguity, its content is obligatorily recovered from the subject of the first conjunct.

(3) a. I went home and (I) wrote a few letters.
b. I will go home and (I) may take a shower before going out again.
c. I worked in Lille at the time and (I) had been working in Geneva before that.
d. They$_1$ came home and (they$_1$)/*(I) had been waiting to tell them the news.
e. He$_1$ wants to go home and (he$_1$)/*(I) have ordered a cab for him.

Second conjunct subject omission (SCSO) is part of the core grammar of English and available across registers.

2.2.2. *Subject omission and referential ambiguity*

In informal spoken English, the pronominal subject of a finite sentence may be left implicit (cf. Thrasher 1977, Napoli 1982, Weir 2012, a.o.). The implicit subject may be first person (4a), second person (4b) or third person (4c). In the latter case, a contextually accessible antecedent will help recover the content of the non-overt subject. The illustrations in (4) are attestations from Christie's *Easy to Kill*. By using subject omission, Christie renders the colloquial nature of the conversation. Note that the author uses this device from early in the story to characterize the informal speech of the characters. There are 92 examples of subject omission in the novel, 6 of which uttered by females, 86 uttered by males. It is not clear what determines the asymmetry: partly we can account for it by the fact that there are more male than female characters, 17 for the former, 9 for the latter, and the male characters provide more of the conversation. It may also be that the perception is that subject omission characterizes less careful speech, which tends to be more characteristic of male speakers (see discussion in Haegeman & Danckaert to appear).

(4) a. Haven't seen the Derby run since I was eighteen. (*MiE* 1939: 8)
b. Can't count accidents. They may happen to anyone. (*MiE* 1939: 38)
c. Employed the best architect in the country. I must say he's made a bare plain job of it – looks like a workhouse or a prison to me. (*MiE* 1939: 36)
d. Used to be the old manor house. Was going for a song. (*MiE* 1939: 41)

The content of the implicit subject may in some cases be recovered through the grammatical features of the sentence, in particular the inflection of the finite verb. For instance, present tense finite verbs set third-person singular subjects apart: in (4c), *looks* must take a third-person subject; in (4a), on the other hand, a third-person subject would necessitate the form *hasn't*, and *haven't* is compatible with first person singular, first person plural, second person singular or plural or third person plural. The use of the auxiliary *be,* whose inflection is richer than that of lexical verbs, also contributes to identifying the grammatical person of the subject in the past tense: in (4d), *was* is incompatible with plural or second person subjects, allowing either first or third-person subjects. These examples already show how subject omission may lead to referential ambiguity or indeterminacy. In (4a), for instance, *haven't* would be compatible with various subjects, though the presence of the first-person subject in the *since* clause will favour

the first-person reading. In (4c) past tense *employed* would be compatible with all person+number combinations. In this example, the context again clearly steers the listener to a first-person reading, but other interpretations remain possible.

2.2.3. *The grammatical features of the omitted subject: no evidence for first person predominance*

It is often thought that while all grammatical person-number combinations are possible, first-person singular omission is the most frequent. This first-person predominance would be related to the fact that while third-person non-overt subjects require an accessible discourse antecedent for recovery of their content, the first person corresponds to the speaker and speaker coordinates are by definition available in direct speech.

However, while out of the blue third-person subject omission seems indeed unlikely because there would be no antecedent available for content recovery, a general predominance of first-person subject omission is not confirmed in Christie's representation of informal speech. Drawn from 4 works by Christie, *Murder is Easy*, the work which is the focus of the present paper, *4:50 from Paddington, The Clocks* and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, two sets of data will be presented to support of this observation. On the one hand, there is no statistically significant first-person predominance in the raw data, i.e., considering all tokens of subject omission in these works. On the other, there is no statistically significant first-person predominance in the frequency of subject omission.

Table 1 summarizes the attestations of first and third-person singular non-overt subjects in the four works examined. As can be seen, third-person singular omissions are slightly more numerous than first-person singular omissions.

Table 1. Raw data: first-person vs. third person subject omissions

Story	1sg	1pl	3sg	3pl	Totals
MiE	32	0	50	0	82
Paddington	50	1	77	3	131
Clocks	19	0	56	3	78
Ackroyd	25	1	35	0	61
Totals	**126**	**2**	**218**	**6**	**352**

Of course, these raw figures do not mean much because it could well be that there are simply many more candidate root clauses with third-person pronominal subjects. To assess the relative omission rate, I have examined for each story five ten-page samples distributed over the texts. The results are presented in Table 2: first-person singular omissions (5,2%) are not more frequent than third-person singular omissions (6,1%), and this is also true for the work under closer scrutiny here, *Murder is Easy*, which displays a ratio of 2,8% first-person omissions and 4,1% third-person singular omissions.

Table 2. Ratio of first-person singular vs. third-person singular subject omissions in 50-page samples

50 page samples: story	total 1sg	1sg0	%1sg	total 3sg	3sg0	%3sg
MiE	180	5	2,8	215	9	4,1
Paddington	231	25	10,8	180	17	9,4
Clocks	196	3	1,5	134	2	1,4
Ackroyd	108	4	3,7	86	10	11,6
Totals	**715**	**37**	**5,2**	**615**	**38**	**6,1**

The data thus confirm that overall, as well as in the particular work under discussion, both first- and third-person omissions are possible. Anticipating the discussion of our core example, note that Christie also switches from first-person omission to third-person omission within a fragment, as illustrated in (5):

(5) The man was an absolute ignoramus. [3sg] Knew nothing of modern discoveries. [Isg] Doubt if he'd ever heard of a neurosis. He understood measles and mumps and broken bones all right, I suppose, but nothing else. [1sg] Had a row with him in the end. He didn't understand Lydia's case at all. I gave it to him straight from the shoulder and he didn't like it. [3sg] Got huffed and backed right out. [3sg] Said I could send for any other doctor I chose. After that, we had Thomas. (*MiE* 1939: 120-21).

Given that omitted subjects may be identified both as first-person singular as well as third person singular, a.o., there is a potential for ambiguity. In what follows, I will show how Christie exploits this potential for referential ambiguity to create a narrative garden path in the sense of Mey (1991), see also Jahn (1999). The ambiguity arises in a pivotal line in *Murder is Easy*: pronoun omission entails that crucial information is being withheld from the investigator as well as the reader and allows for two interpretations that are both plausible but have different implications. The uncovering of the perpetrator crucially revolves round the correct interpretation of the ambiguity.

3. *MURDER IS EASY*: PLOT SUMMARY

I first summarize the main elements of the plot needed for my discussion.

In *Murder is Easy*, Luke Fitzwilliam ('Luke') investigates a series of murders in Wychwood-under-the-Ashe to which he had been alerted on a train journey to London by Miss Lavinia Pinkerton[1], who had, among other things, referred to "the look on a person's face" (*MiE* 1939: 16), referring to a specific look on the criminal's face when he/she is about to commit a murder. Immediately after their meeting in the train, Lavinia Pinkerton herself had been killed in a road accident in London.

During his inquiry, Luke is staying with Lord Whitfield[2], at Ashe Manor. Gordon Ragg, now Lord Gordon Withfield, is a self-made man who has made his fortune as the publisher of popular weekly papers (cf. "those nasty little weekly papers", *MiE* 1939: 26) and who has

[1] Fullerton in the US edition *Easy to kill.*
[2] Easterfield in the US edition *Easy to kill.*

subsequently returned to Wychwood-under-Ashe, where he is "making the place into a 'model estate'" (*MiE* 1939: 26). Lord Whitfield was previously engaged to Miss Honoria Waynflete. At the start of the story, Lord Whitfield is engaged to his secretary Bridget Conway, whom Luke Fitzwilliam confides in and who also participates in the enquiry. Luke Fitzwilliam himself falls in love with Bridget Conway.

As the story develops, multiple suspects emerge. Importantly, subtle contributions by Honoria Waynflete cumulatively lead to delimitations of the suspects. For instance, at the inquest of Amy Gibbs, the conclusion was that the victim died by oxalic acid poisoning because she mistook a bottle of hat paint for her bottle of cough mixture (*MiE* 1939: 61, 143). However, by the way she reports this, Honoria Waynflete gave the impression "she was leaving some part of the story untold" (*MiE* 1939: 61) and Luke Fitzwilliam has "a strong[er] feeling that, for some reason, she wanted him to be aware of the fact". (*MiE* 1939: 61). The observation that the hat paint used to kill Amy Gibbs would not be used by women anymore, leads Honoria Waynflete and Bridget Conway to the conclusion that the murderer was male, hence female suspects are not taken into consideration (*MiE* 1939: 74). The hypothesis that the perpetrator of the murders is male is adopted by Luke Fitzwilliam (*MiE* 1939: 163 and *MiE* 1939: 164). Honoria Waynflete also implies she knows who Lavinia Pinkerton had in mind as the prime suspect for the murders. Though she then does not actually reveal their name, she conveys that the suspected murderer is highly esteemed in the village. Shortly after this exchange, she manages to lead Luke up to a scene in which Lord Whitfield is seen to lose his temper with his driver, Rivers, who is subsequently found murdered (see also *MiE* 1939: 238). Thus, gradually Luke's suspicion starts to focus on Lord Whitfield. This suspicion is boosted when Lord Whitfield himself points out that recently all those with whom he had a quarrel have come to a bad end (*MiE* 1939: 197) and ascribes this sequence of events to some divine power, adding that this was in fact pointed out to him by Honoria Waynflete (*MiE* 1939: 208: "Ask Honoria Waynflete".)

In the final sections, it emerges that not Lord Whitfield but Honoria Waynflete herself is guilty of the murders and that her motive for the murders is the break-up of her engagement to Lord Withfield.

The explanation for the break-up of the engagement, ultimately Honoria Waynflete's motive for the crimes, is introduced at about two thirds through the story. When Honoria Waynflete and Lord Withfield were engaged, Honoria Waynflete had a pet canary which she loved dearly but which she killed in a fit of rage. Lord Withfield, who witnessed the killing, was horrified and as a result, he broke off their engagement. Through the series of murders, Honoria Waynflete takes revenge for having been jilted by Lord Withfield: by committing the murders she intends to incriminate Lord Withfield.

Christie introduces the story of the break-up in a line that creates a narrative garden path, leading the investigator (and the reader) astray. Through the remainder of the story the garden path is maintained in the text, with the red herring, the incorrect default reading, first being strengthened, then challenged later and only being replaced by the correct reading, i.e., what would have been a clue, towards the end for the *denouement.* Before exploring the key passage which I am interested in, I will first provide some additional observations on Honoria Waynflete and Lord Withfield's engagement.

4. HONORIA WAYNFLETE AND LORD WITHFIELD'S ENGAGEMENT

Honoria Waynflete is a spinster from a respected family in the village; she is the daughter of Colonel Waynflete. At one point Bridget Conway points out that "She's quite intelligent […] went to Girton or wanted to, and was advanced when she was young." (*MiE* 1939: 75) Lord

Withfield starts out as Gordon Ragg; he is a self-made man whose father was a boot maker. Whitfield is rather proud of this, as becomes clear at the first encounter with Luke:

(6) "I'm not ashamed of it and I don't care who knows it," went on that gentleman. "I had none of your natural advantages. My father kept a boot-shop – yes, a plain boot-shop. And I served in that shop when I was a young lad. I raised myself by my own efforts, Fitzwilliam – I determined to get out of the rut – and I have got out of the rut. Perseverance, hard work, and the help of God – that's what did it! That's what made me what I am to-day." (*MiE* 1939: 35)

That Lord Withfield is a self-made man without education is prominent from the start of the story, and it is reflected among other things in the tasteless renovation of Ashe Manor (cf. "the appalling and incongruous castellated mass that greeted his eyes", *MiE* 1939: 30-1), which Luke Fitzwilliam characterizes as a 'nightmare' (*MiE* 1939: 30). Lord Withfield has also saved Wych Hall, Honoria's childhood home, and turned it into the library, but in contrast to his own home, this has remained an intact Georgian building (*MiE* 1939: 63). Referring to Lord Withfield's impact on the community, the final line of the following passage is of interest:

(7) "Lord Whitfield has been a great benefactor to Wychwood," said Miss Waynflete. "It grieves me that there are people who are sadly ungrateful."
Her lips pressed themselves together. Luke discreetly asked no questions. (*MiE* 1939: 63)

Lord Withfield's road from rags to riches and his becoming the benefactor of the village also is signalled by other characters: Major Horton underlines how he became a benefactor of the village after having risen from poverty to riches (8a), and Mrs Pierce, the shopkeeper and mother of one of the victims, (8b) underlines the social difference between him and Miss Waynflete or Miss Conway. On the other hand, Lord Withfield is not generally admired, as shown in (8c), uttered by an old labourer whom Luke meets at the pub.

(8) a. "Lord Whitfield," he said, "has been a handsome benefactor here. He realises the disadvantages under which he himself suffered as a boy and is determined that the youth of to-day shall be better equipped." (*MiE* 1939: p. 113)
b. "Of course, his lordship's done a lot for the place. He means well, we all know that."
"But you don't think his efforts are quite successful?" said Luke amused.
"Well, of course, sir, he isn't really gentry – not like Miss Waynflete, for instance, and Miss Conway. Why, Lord Whitfield's father kept a boot-shop only a few doors from here. My mother remembers Gordon Ragg serving in the shop – remembers it as well as anything. Of course, he is his lordship now and he's a rich man – but it's never the same, is it, sir?" (*MiE* 1939: 97)
c. Think we don't all know your father kept a boot shop down here? Makes us laugh ourselves sick, it does, seeing you strutting about as cock of the walk. Who are you, I'd like to know? You're no better than I am – that's what you are. (*MiE* 1939: 175)

The fact that Honoria Waynflete and Lord Withfield were engaged at one time plays an important part in the plot; it provides the key to the motive of the murders. The engagement comes up early in the story when Luke Fitzwilliam meets with Honoria Waynflete. The latter tells him the following:

(9) "You know I was engaged to him once," she said unexpectedly.
Luke stared in astonishment. She was nodding her head and smiling rather sadly.
"A long time ago. He was such a promising boy. I had helped him, you know, to educate himself. And I was so proud of his – his spirit and the way he was determined to succeed."
She sighed again.
"My people, of course, were scandalised. Class distinctions in those days were very strong." She added after a minute or two, "I've always followed his career with great interest. My people, I think, were wrong."
Then, with a smile, she nodded a farewell and went back into the house. (*MiE* 1939: 150)

Lord Withfield himself refers to the social difference between him and Honoria Waynflete at the time of the engagement:

(10) "Her people were the nobs of this place."
…
"Old Colonel Waynflete bossed the show. One had to come out and touch one's cap pretty sharp. One of the old school he was, and proud as Lucifer."
… "The fat was in the fire all right when Honoria announced she was going to marry me! Called herself a Radical, she did. Very earnest. Was all for abolishing class distinctions. She was a serious kind of girl." (*MiE* 1939: 177)

Throughout the story Lord Withfield speaks positively about Honoria Waynflete, pointing out, among other things, that she is an excellent librarian (11).

(11) I respect Honoria. Capable woman and a lady [….]. She runs that library business very well. (*MiE* 1939: 178).

It is worth mentioning, that the relationship between Honoria Waynflete and Lord Withfield has somehow changed since the times of their engagement. While he refers to her and addresses her as *Honoria* or *Honoria Waynflete*, she on the other hand, does refer to him as *Gordon* but she mostly addresses him as *Lord Whitfield* (cf. (12), also (7)) using his first name only once in an emotionally loaded scene towards the end (*MiE* 1939: 210, "Miss Waynflete said sharply, 'Put it away, Gordon, for goodness' sake!'").

(12) "Is that you, Honoria? I'm deeply distressed you should have witnessed such a disgraceful scene. That man's language _"
"I'm afraid he wasn't quite himself, Lord Whitfield," said Miss Waynflete primly.
…
"Come up to the house, Honoria, and have a glass of sherry."
"Thank you, Lord Whitfield, but I must go to Mrs Humbleby with these books."
(*MiE* 1939: 175)

The following fragment shows that the break-up of the engagement was something that Honoria Waynflete could not forgive, and it relates also to her perception of her social superiority to Lord Withfield.

(13) "yes, I always had brains, even as a girl! But they wouldn't let me do anything… I had to stay at home – doing nothing. And then Gordon – just a common bootmaker's son, but he had ambition, I knew. I knew he would rise in the world. And he jilted me jilted *me*. All because of that ridiculous business with the bird."
…
"Gordon Ragg daring to jilt *me* – Colonel Waynflete's daughter! I swore I'd pay him for that!" (*MiE* 1939: 233)

Later, after the engagement, Lord Withfield turns up 'all rich and prosperous and successful' (*MiE* 1939: 251), this is starkly opposed to Honoria Waynflete's situation: her career was thwarted because she was a woman. Lord Withfield tries to support Honoria Waynflete's family financially, by buying her family home, Wych Hall, and turning it into a public library. She becomes his (unpaid) librarian, commenting:

(14) "How I hated him then. But I never showed my feelings. We were taught that as girls – a most valuable training. That, I always think, is where breeding tells." (*MiE* 1939: 233-4)

Recall (7) above in which Honoria Waynflete underlines Lord Withfield's generosity to the village. At this point 'Her lips pressed themselves together. Luke discreetly asked no questions.' (*MiE* 1939: 63). The pressed lips reflect Honoria Waynflete's own resentment with respect to Lord Withfield.

In a later passage, Inspector Battle underlines Honoria Waynflete's bitterness at having been thwarted, both in terms of wanting a career and in her love affair (*MiE* 1939: 248). In addition to social class, there are also several references to gender inequality as illustrated in (13) and (14).

5. WHO KILLED THE CANARY? SUBJECT OMISSION AND REFERENTIAL AMBIGUITY IN *MURDER IS EASY*

One development in the plotline of *Murder is Easy* hinges on the correct identification of the killer of Honoria Waynflete's pet canary.

(i) Whoever killed the canary, an innocent bird, has the potential to kill an innocent loved being and thus, by inference, to kill again.

(ii) The killing of the canary and the way it revealed Honoria Waynflete's potential for violence ultimately was the cause for the break-up of Lord Withfield and Honoria Waynflete's engagement; this break-up in turn is the ground for Honoria Waynflete's resentment and vindictiveness', ultimately her motive for the killings.

5.1. Lord Withfield's first discussion: the introduction of the garden path

At the first mention of the killing of the canary, the killer's identity is withheld from the investigator (and the reader) through the deployment of the referential ambiguity resulting from register-specific subject omission. Lord Withfield explains the end of his engagement to Honoria Waynflete as follows:

(15) Matter of fact we had a bit of a row over something. Blinking bird she had – one of those beastly tittering canaries – always hated them – bad business – *wrung its neck.* (*MiE* 1939: 178, italics: lh)

Note in passing that this omission is in keeping with Christie's tendency to associate subject omission with male speakers (see Haegeman & Danckaert to appear for discussion). To create the ambiguity, past tense choice is essential: a present perfect variant of the key line in (15), illustrated in the variants (16a, 16b), would not lead to the same ambiguity. In an alternative reading according to which *Wrung its neck* might be seen as a truncated format for a perfect again either first or third-person readings would be available as shown in (16c), with first person probably the default reading and third person also possible in view of the context. It seems to me though that given the fact that this is a narrative of past events, the simple past variant is overall the more suitable one for the context.

(16) a. I/*she have wrung its neck.
b. *I/She has wrung its neck.
c. (I have/ She has) wrung its neck.

In other passages in the story (see (4)), subject omission may merely be used by Christie to render the colloquial flavour of the conversation, but while also conveying this colloquial flavour, in the pivot line (15) subject omission introduces an indeterminacy of interpretation whose effect cascades through the story. A.o. the implied subject of past tense *wrung* could be first person ('I'), or third person ('she'). A first-person reading is in line with the continuity of reference, with *always hated them* in the preceding context also having an implied first-person subject. The third-person reading is in general available for subject omission patterns (see Section 2.2.3), and it is a possibility for (15) if we consider that the 'subjective' speaker-related passages *one of those beastly tittering canaries, always hated them* and *bad business* are orthographically set off by dashes, suggesting they are parenthetical asides. Eliminating these parenthetical segments, the line *wrung its neck* can be connected directly to the initial *blinking bird she had,* in which 'she' is the discourse topic.[3]

In (15), crucial information to unmask the perpetrator of the crimes is withheld from the investigator (and the reader). The most obvious reading of this line is probably the first-person interpretation, i.e., that according to which Luke (and the reader) interpret the relevant sentence in (15) as 'I wrung its neck', i.e., the killer of the canary is Lord Withfield. This interpretation in turn would lead to the inference that because she was horrified by the killing of her canary by her fiancé, Honoria Waynflete broke off their engagement. First-person interpretation is in line with the storyline: that Lord Withfield would be referring to himself is also expected given his inclination to focus all conversation upon himself, a point repeatedly highlighted. First-person interpretation of *wrung* is furthermore compatible with and strengthens Luke's recently acquired suspicion that Lord Withfield may well be the murderer that Lavinia Pinkerton was hinting at and for which supporting evidence had been accumulating. First, Luke had already witnessed the scene in which Lord Withfield was very aggressive to his driver Rivers (*MiE* 1939: 174-175). Additional support for Lord Withfield's involvement is that a policeman present at the scene where Lavinia Pinkerton was killed in the London traffic accident reported that a female witness had given Lord Withfield's numberplate as that of the car involved (*MiE* 1939: 200). It will turn out that this witness was repeating a number reported to her by Honoria Waynflete, the murderer who was present at the scene.

[3] Thanks to Jacqueline van Kampen for pointing out the relevance of the punctuation here.

In what I suggest may be taken as an aside, Lord Withfield comments on the event with 'bad business'… Observe that there is some vagueness as to what he is referring to as 'bad business': is it the killing of the canary, which led to the break-up of the engagement, or is it the breakup itself, and how it happened? Both tie in with the fact that ultimately it will become clear that the killing of the canary set off a sequence of events that ultimately led to the murders that are at the core of the story.

A few lines after the fragment above (*MiE* 1939: 178) Lord Withfield says:

(17) Don't think she's ever forgiven me. Well, perhaps it's only natural (*MiE* 1939: 178)

The passage is also elliptical and creates a narrative garden path of its own: there is no explicitation of which act has not been forgiven and depending on the interpretation of the subject of *wrung its neck* in (15), two possibilities arise, explicitized in (18a) and (18b).

(18) a. I don't think she's ever forgiven me for killing the canary.
b. I don't think she's ever forgiven me for breaking up our engagement.

(i) If *wrung its neck* is taken to have a first-person subject, the propositional content of (17) is explicitized as in variant (18a), in which Honoria Waynflete breaks off the engagement because Lord Withfield killed her pet.
(ii) If, on the other hand, *wrung its neck* is taken to have a third-person subject, the canary was killed by Honoria Waynflete, the referent of the discourse topic (*she)*. In this reading, the forgiving in (17) is not about killing the canary but rather about Lord Withfield's breaking off the engagement because Honoria Waynflete killed the canary.

In the story, the killing of the canary and the subsequent break-up of the engagement form the motive for the crime. According to (18a) Honoria Waynflete's murders would be motivated by her desire to avenge the killing of the canary by Lord Whitfield, which she's never forgiven him for. The alternative, (18b), is compatible with the actual development and the denouement that Honoria Waynflete's is the killer, and her motive is a desire to avenge the break-up of the engagement.

As a participant in the conversation Lord Withfield is not being maximally cooperative in (15), he is withholding information which he has at his disposal: as the only witness at the scene when the canary was killed, he knew and thus could have made it clear that Honoria Waynflete was the culprit by using as an overt subject the pronoun *she.* Lord Withfield, who consistently speaks positively about Honoria Waynflete (cf. (11)), thus avoids putting her in a negative light by spelling out her role in the killing of the canary, which he may well consider irrelevant. See also the discussion of (24) in Section 5.4.

5.2. Second discussion: Honoria Waynflete's version: the default challenged and maintained

When discussing the end of her engagement with Honoria Waynflete, Luke refrains from assigning agency to the killing of the canary, thus echoing the vagueness of (15). By using the passive in (19), *a bird whose neck was wrung*, the agent of the activity is demoted (cf. Section 2.1). One might assume that the agent is not mentioned because it is not important. (19) thus maintains the garden path created by (15).

(19) He told me there was something about a bird – a bird whose neck was wrung… (*MiE* 1939: 203)

This is immediately picked up by Honoria Waynflete who confirms the first-person reading of (15) and assigns agency to Lord Whitfield saying: "he *admitted* it? That's extraordinary" and then providing her own account of the break-up of their engagement. She explicitly identifies Lord Withfield as the jealous killer of her pet, confirming and strengthening the first-person reading. Christie uses the string *wrung its neck* in (20), verbatim repeating the pivot line, but due to SCSO the interpretation of the subject of the second conjunct is here obligatorily read as 'Gordon'. There is no ambiguity in (20).

(20) And I, in the rather silly way girls went on in those days, laughed and held it up on my finger saying something like: "Of course I love you, dicky bird, better than a great silly boy! Of course, I do!" Then – oh, it was frightening – Gordon snatched the bird from me and *wrung its neck;* It was such a shock – I shall never forget it. (*MiE* 1939: 204)

As a result, Lord Withfield is shown to be capable of unprovoked cruelty, i.e., he has the killer instinct, and he becomes the prime suspect. Honoria Waynflete underlines the importance of this piece of information in "oh, it was frightening".

In the final part of the story, however, mainly through the agency of Bridget Conway, it turns out that Honoria Waynflete is not a reliable witness (see also (25) below).

5.3. Balancing the garden path: challenging the default

As indicated above, the correct interpretation of the implicit subject in the line *wrung its neck* in (15), i.e., identifying who killed the canary, plays a crucial role in the development of the plotline. Whoever killed the innocent canary has the killer instinct and may well be capable of murdering humans too.

In (21) Bridget Conway questions Honoria Waynflete's claim that Lord Withfield is the killer (20), as endorsed by Luke. Bridget Conway does not believe that Lord Withfield is capable of murder (21) and hence could have killed the canary, challenging the default reading of (15). In response, Luke reconfirms this reading in (22), about which Bridget Conway repeats her doubt (23).

(21) "Gordon? *Gordon – a murderer?* Gordon *the* murderer? I never heard anything so ridiculous in all my life!"
"That's how it strikes you?"
"Yes, indeed. Why, Gordon wouldn't hurt a fly." (*MiE* 1939: 215)

(22) But he certainly killed a canary bird, and I'm pretty certain he's killed a large number of human beings as well. (*MiE* 1939: 215)

(23) "My dear Luke, I simply can't believe it." (*MiE* 1939: 215)

5.4. Reversing the default and solving the ambiguity: Lord Withfield identifies the killer

At a later point, though, Luke Fitzwilliam becomes suspicious of Honoria Waynflete after comments from Mrs. Humbleby, the widow of one of the victims (*MiE* 1939: 244). Honoria Waynflete's account of the breakup of the engagement with Lord Withfield in (20) is revealed

to be incorrect in an exchange between a policeman and Lord Withfield in (24). Observe that again, as in (20), Christie uses the string *wrung its neck* in (24), verbatim repeating the pivot line, but here due to SCSO the interpretation of the subject of the second conjunct is obligatorily read as 'she'. There is no ambiguity in (24). Even at this point Lord Withfield himself is reluctant to blame Honoria Waynflete ("O, very well, if I must.").

(24) Superintendent Battle amended the phrase. "It was you who terminated the engagement?" "Well – yes." "Tell us why, Gordon," said Bridget. Lord Whitfield got rather red. He said: "O, very well, if I must. Honoria had a canary. She was very fond of it. It used to take sugar from her lips. One day it pecked her violently instead. She was angry and picked it up – and wrung its neck! I-I couldn't feel the same after that. I told her I thought we'd both make a mistake." (*MiE* 1939: 248)

The line *wrung its neck* – and the identification of the subject of *wrung* as 'she'- is pivotal in the development of the plot because it reveals the motive for the murders. Precisely because Honoria Waynflete killed her pet canary, Lord Withfield broke off their engagement. Honoria Waynflete took her revenge by committing the killings which she tried to get Lord Withfield incriminated and convicted for.

6. THE DENOUEMENT

Because Honoria Waynflete killed the canary, Lord Withfield ended their engagement. Bridget Conway realizes that Honoria Waynflete's revenge for the breakup of the engagement consisted in committing the murders to implicate Lord Withfield as their perpetrator (25).

(25) And then a curious sort of whirling feeling came in my brain, and I thought – but suppose *everything* she says is a lie – and I suddenly saw how easily a woman like that could make a fool of a man. (*MiE* 1939: 251)

When Bridget Conway's defense of Lord Withfield is taken seriously, the investigators realize that Honoria Waynflete is an unreliable witness. The reversal in her status is the result of resolving the referential ambiguity in (15) and hence of the identification of the killer of the canary.

(26) It worried him [Lord Withfield] even to kill a wasp. That story about killing Miss Waynflete's canary – it was all *wrong*. He just couldn't have done it. He told me once that he had jilted her. Now you insisted that it was *the other way about.* Well, that might be so! His pride might not have allowed him to admit that she had thrown him over. But not the canary story! (*MiE* 1939: 250)

7. SUMMARY AND SOME EXTENSIONS

In the development of this story, Christie uses subject omission in a finite clause, which reflects the informal flavour of speech (see also Haegeman & Danckaert to appear), to set the reader on the wrong foot by introducing an ambiguity of reference and thus creating a narrative garden path. Through subject omission, the agent of the killing of a canary is not encoded. While the incorrect first-person reading is initially privileged, the alternative third-person interpretation is ultimately revealed to be the correct one.

The revelation that Honoria Waynflete killed the canary shows that she has the killer instinct, and it also directly feeds into her motive of the murders: the murders were committed as an elaborate revenge for Lord Withfield's breaking off their engagement.

Murder is Easy/Easy to Kill is not the only story in which referential ambiguity plays a crucial role in the development of the plot. Elsewhere, Christie also deploys the potential ambiguity of pronouns, i.e. the third-person singular pronoun *she*, in *The Mirror Cracked from Side to Side* and in *The Clocks*. Interestingly, in both these works there are explicit references to the potential for ambiguity in the use of pronouns.

In *The Mirror Cracked* (1965) a crucial ambiguity of reference is introduced in the following segment:

(27) "For goodness' sake, what was funny?" she demanded.
"I'm almost sure she did it on purpose."
"Spilt the cocktail on purpose?"
"Yes. And I do think that was funny, don't you?"
"On a brand-new dress? I don't believe it." (*TMC* 1968: 137[4])

The line 'she did it on purpose' is initially wrongly interpreted with *she* referring to the victim, the guest Heather Badcock, whereas in fact the person causing the upset of the drink is the host, Marina Gregg, who turns out to be the killer. Marina Gregg deliberately upset the victim's glass so that she is able to offer her guest a poisoned drink as a replacement.

Later, Miss Marple, the investigator, reflects on how the referential ambiguity of the pronoun *she* led to the wrong interpretation, referring to 'the wrong use of pronouns':

(28) "And that's where the element of puzzle has come into the matter, owing to the fact that people cannot remember to use their pronouns properly."
"It reminds me so much of that parlourmaid I was telling you about," she added to Dermot. "I only had the account, you see, of what Gladys Dixon said to Cherry which simply was that she was worried about the ruin of Heather Badcock's dress with the cocktail spilt down it. What seemed so funny, she said, was that she did it on purpose. But the "she" that Glady's referred to was not Heather Badcock, it was Marina Gregg. As Gladys said: She did it on purpose! She jogged Heather's arm. Not by accident but because she meant to do so." (*Clocks* 1963: 184)

A similar use of referential ambiguity is found in the following passage in *The Clocks*, in which Edna Brent wants to report that one witness statement at the inquest was not correct.

(29) "And she said well not really. It was just something, she said, that she didn't see how it could have been the way she'd said it was."
"She didn't see how what she said could have been like that?" Hardcastle repeated.
"That's right, sir. I'm not sure of the exact words. Perhaps it was: "I don't see how what she said can have been true." She was frowning and looking puzzled. But when I asked her, she said it wasn't really important." (*Clocks* 1963: 145-6)

Later, Poirot picks up this statement, focusing on the fact that the words are a crucial component here, pointing out that the pronoun *she* did not unequivocally pick out one referent:

(30) Hercule Poirot looked at me. He wagged a finger.

[4] Also pages 152-3.

> "Her words to the constable at the inquest are the only clue we have as to what was worrying her: She said something like: 'I don't see how what she said can have been true.' "
> Three women had given evidence that morning. Edna could have been referring to Miss Pebmarsh. Or, as it has been generally assumed, she could have been referring to Sheila Webb. But there is a third possibility—she could have been referring to Miss Martindale.'
> "Miss Martindale? But her evidence only lasted a few minutes."
> "Exactly. It consisted only of the telephone call she had received purporting to be from Miss Pebmarsh."
> "Do you mean that Edna knew that it wasn't from Miss Pebmarsh?"
> "I think it was simpler than that. I am suggesting that there was no telephone call at all."
> (*Clocks* 1963: 238-9)

This paper brings to the fore how Agatha Christie uses grammatical patterns to create a narrative garden path: a referential ambiguity entails that a particular passage can either be a clue or a red herring. For more discussion of this author's use of grammar to style characters see also Haegeman & Danckaert (to appear).

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