

# Stylistics: Linguistics for the Student of Literature

by Ean Taylor



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### Scope of Topic

A brief explanation of linguistics and its apparent conflict with literary studies, followed by an indication of how stylistics may resolve the problem, taking three introductory texts by way of illustration.

### BOOKS TO READ

K. Wales: *A Dictionary of Stylistics* (Longman, 1989)

N.F. Blake: *An Introduction to the Language of Literature* (Macmillan, 1990)

G.N Leech and M.H. Short, *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose* (Longman, 1981)

### INTRODUCTION

Linguistics proclaims itself, in almost every introductory textbook devoted to the subject, to be the *scientific* study of language. Because of this emphasis on science, practitioners of linguistics - linguists - value, amongst other things, objectivity and reliability. The prime duty with any text is to provide an accurate description of its elements and structure. If the linguist's job is done well, all this will be objective - matters of fact, avoiding value judgements so far as humanly possible; and it will be reliable - any linguist applying the same techniques would produce the same analyses.

As any natural text will consist of identifiable units combined in certain ways, linguists are prepared to take any such text as a basis for study - *Hamlet* cigar advertisements equally with *Hamlet*, travel brochures alongside *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

The qualities so prized by linguists are precisely those that have led students working in traditional approaches to literature to be suspicious or even hostile. Literary criticism, for the most part of this century, has been relatively happy to set up a canon of texts that are felt to be intrinsically valuable, these works constituting 'literature' in a way in which other writing does not. Because literature is a form of art, aesthetic judgements become not only possible but desirable, so that texts linguists would term equally 'well formed', by virtue of their employing certain rules and units in a systematic fashion, would be evaluated against one another by literary critics, but on quite different grounds. And because beauty is proverbially in the eye of the beholder, subjectivity is the norm. Indeed, is literature not written to produce a response from the individual, and is it not therefore quite proper for such reactions to vary?

Linguists, then, can be accused of producing arid analyses and of destroying sensitivity and the notion of 'good writing'. They can reply by claiming that literary critics perversely refuse to strive for the clarity that linguistic terminology permits, and either that subjectivity leads to the 'anything goes' approach, or conversely that only certain responses are permitted by those who say they somehow know best, despite the lack of a scientific basis for the claim.

The controversy continues, to the disadvantage of all concerned. Yet why should the protagonists see themselves as being so far apart? Can't the scalpels of linguistics be applied to dissect literature in such a way as to help to explain how the effects on the reader have been created? Aren't students of literature interested in bringing (more) precision to their

commentaries? And isn't everybody in this business ultimately left to deal with the same thing - the combination of the bits that thereby constitute a text? Happily, there is an approach that recognises that all these questions are rhetorical ones: stylistics.

## NOTES

The first book to be considered here is unique (so far) in the *Bookmark* series in that it is a dictionary: *A Dictionary of Stylistics*, in fact, written by Katie Wales and published in 1987. Where better to go for a definition of our subject-matter? Wales makes many crucial points. One of these we have taken as a central tenet, namely that linguistics and literary criticism can be usefully brought together. Another aspect we have not mentioned, however - that stylistics did not spring fully formed out of the ether. Look at what Wales says, presented here in slightly modified form.

Stylistics: the study of style; yet just as style can be viewed in several ways, so there are several different stylistic approaches. This variety in stylistics is due to the main influences of linguistics and literary criticism.

Stylistics in the twentieth century replaces and expands on the earlier study of . . . rhetoric . . . It was in the 1960s that it really began to flourish in Britain and the United States, given impetus from post-war developments in descriptive linguistics . . .

In many respects, however, stylistics is close to literary criticism and practical criticism. By far the most common kind of material studied is literary; and attention is largely text-centred. Moreover, the texts popularly studied tend to be those regarded as important in English studies . . . The goal of most stylistic studies is not simply to describe the formal features of texts for their own sake, but in order to show their functional significance for the interpretation of the text; or in order to relate literary effects to linguistic "causes" where these are felt to be relevant. Intuitions and interpretative skills are just as important in stylistics and literary criticism; however, stylisticians want to avoid vague and impressionistic judgements about the way formal features are manipulated (not that good literary criticism is necessarily vague or impressionistic). As a result, stylistics draws on the models and terminology provided by whatever aspects of linguistics are felt to be relevant.

No apology is necessary for quoting Wales at such length: it would be difficult to imagine a clearer exposition of the issues. Actually, the extract above does not do justice to the author in one important respect: in the original, certain terms quoted, e.g. *style*, *practical criticism*, appear in small capitals as a way of indicating that there are entries for these elsewhere in the dictionary. On the other hand, as the extract *does* illustrate, *Dictionary* is an inadequate title. Whilst Wales' book is dictionary-like in overall format - there are headwords, presented in alphabetical order, and for which definitions are provided - it is much more besides. As she says in her own introduction to the work, it is also intended as a guide-book, 'to give a general picture of the nature and aims of stylistics, its approaches, methodologies and insights . . . in the hope of facilitating and stimulating further study'.

Even a random sample will show both how eclectic is the work and how well the author succeeds in her intentions. Flip open the page at the *M*s and you will find juxtaposed *main clause* from traditional grammatical analysis; *malapropism*, where a term in common usage, derived from a character in Sheridan's *The Rivals*, is linked with the stylistic notion of *deviance*; and *manner*, *maxim of*, which takes us into a philosophical discussion of everyday speech and the connections that might be made with the literary notion of *stream of consciousness writing*. At the start of the dictionary you will find entries for *abstract nouns*,

*acronym* and *adjacency pair*, whilst to the surprise of no one familiar with traditional classifications of figures of speech, the final headword is *zeugma*. This is an indispensable handbook and would make an excellent companion to either (or both) of the other two works we shall be considering.

Norman Blake's *An Introduction to the Language of Literature* was published in 1990. Blake takes it as axiomatic that 'anyone studying the language of literature has to know something about linguistics' and then makes two further assumptions - that those who lack that knowledge now have plenty of introductory/general/theoretical textbooks of linguistics to which they can turn without help from the stylistician, and that, in any case, a fairly basic knowledge is sufficient for most purposes. Since the foundation for linguistic theory that is most likely to be most accessible to most students is traditional grammar, Blake adopts an approach informed by his own *Traditional English Grammar and Beyond*, published two years earlier.

Linguists, when introducing their discipline to novices, frequently feel constrained to use what is referred to as a 'bottom-up' approach. By this, they mean beginning with the smallest significant element of speech (the phoneme), looking for rules by which phonemes can stand alone or combine with others to produce a unit of meaning (the morpheme), and continuing up the linguistic hierarchy, through words and clauses, until the sentence is reached. Increasingly, interest has been expressed in going past the sentence to see how discourse operates - how, for example, is cohesion produced between sentences? This is clearly a matter of concern for students of literature, where texts almost by definition consist of more than isolated sentences.

Blake wisely decides that neither extremity makes a good departure point for his purposes. Sounds are, especially for poetry and prose fiction, not the elements that make primary impact when silent reading is the dominant mode in which present-day students come to grips with a text. Discourse analysis, on the other hand, is treated even by some linguists as being at the farthest tip of their discipline, and certainly not something of which any knowledge could be assumed on the part of a newcomer. Instead, Blake goes first for grammatical analysis of sentences, then on to noun groups and other group structures (verb, adverb, prepositional). Later chapters deal with vocabulary, sounds and patterns, pragmatics ('the study of meaning in language which arises from its contextual situation') and cohesion.

The device for showing the reader how stylistics actually works is both simple and effective. Blake takes Shakespeare's Sonnet 129 *Th'Expence of Spirit* and considers it from the perspective of the relevant chapter's title - sentence structure, vocabulary and so on. Additionally, he concerns himself in each case with examples taken from other sources, which often differ from the Shakespearean in being prose and more modern. Cohesion in Blake's own work is therefore partly produced by using a particular poem as a recurrent theme (you might wish to consult Wales on *leitmotif* here). The other major cohesive stratagem is reached in the Conclusion. Up to that point, as Blake says, he has 'considered the various linguistic mechanisms that can be examined as part of the stylistic analysis of a literary text'. His book culminates in the bringing together of these different elements by applying them all to one particular piece, so that they may be seen to work organically rather than purely mechanically. To this end, he takes W.H. Auden's short poem *This Lunar Beauty* and subjects it to a most revealing analysis. Beginning with the sentence structure, he is able to show how the rhyming pattern is at variance with that structure. He moves on to discuss problems of structural interpretation within clauses and to consider the role of various types of groups. Interestingly, cohesion is addressed at this level - the fact that the poem both begins and ends with a particular type of sentence structure - before matters of meaning are taken on board. Vocabulary and the presuppositions underlying pragmatic meanings are finally considered. Blake hopes that his book will demonstrate how 'even the simplest poem can be made to offer unexpected insights' through the application of stylistic analysis. If you work methodically through his examples and commentaries, there is every reason for the author's wish to be fulfilled.

Our final book for discussion is, chronologically, the earliest of the three: *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose* was written by Geoffrey Leech and Michael Short and published in 1981, but has been so popular that by 1991 it was in its ninth impression, making it contemporaneous with the other two. Like Blake, these authors proceed from the basis that their readers will either already possess the limited linguistic terminology deemed necessary or else be able to acquire it relatively painlessly from other (indicated) sources.

In our own Introduction, we made reference to 'the scalpels of linguistics'. Leech and Short begin with what might be taken as an implied reprimand: they propose, they say, 'not to dissect the flower of beauty (for that is a misleading metaphor), but at least to scrutinize it carefully, even, from time to time, under a microscope'. They also make the point already seen in our references to the works of Wales and Blake, namely, that stylistics, 'the study of relation between linguistic form and literary function, cannot be reduced to mechanical objectivity. In both the literary and the stylistic spheres much rests on the intuition and personal judgement of the reader, for which a system, however good, is an aid rather than a substitute . . . The modern linguist's scrutiny is not just a matter of looking *at* the text, but of looking *through* the text to its significance.'

As the title of their book indicates, their concern, unlike that of either Wales or Blake, is with fictional prose alone, Leech's own *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* having been produced twelve years earlier. Their work is divided into two major parts. Part I begins with the problematic nature of the notion of style, providing a particularly enlightening discussion of 'monism' - the idea that form and meaning in language are inseparable; 'dualism' - the opposite view; and 'pluralism', which wishes to go beyond dualism and disentangle different threads of meaning in a multifunctional way. They move on to consider ways in which style may be measured; conscious of the problems inherent here too, they carefully avoid overstating their claims, yet maintain the value of a quantitative approach - what they call 'the uses of arithmetic'. To take one example: *deviance* is seen as a wholly statistical phenomenon. Is it felt that a feature, e.g. the meaning of a word or the use of a particular sentence structure, appears more frequently in the text under consideration by the stylistician than it does elsewhere? If so, then some fairly simple number-crunching ought to decide the matter one way or another. (You might at this point like to consult Wales at *deviation* and *foregrounding*.)

Given that the authors' avowed intention is to be more practical than theoretical, they next provide 'a checklist of linguistic and stylistic categories', and it may be instructive to see what sorts of things these are. Of nouns, for example, the reader is asked to consider whether they are abstract or concrete, and what use is made of proper names, whereas of noun phrases the initial question is whether they are relatively simple or complex. Under 'phonological schemes' we are to give thought to rhyme, alliteration, assonance, etc., whilst in matters producing cohesion the authors suggest looking for use of cross-reference by pronouns, and for elegant variation.

The categories are then immediately applied to the opening passages of three short stories by Joseph Conrad, D.H. Lawrence and Henry James respectively. Only a careful reading of the analyses (including numerical tables and reference to statistical tests) will demonstrate how painstaking they are and how mindful Leech and Short always are of the requirement to *utilise* the linguistic data to illuminate the literary functions. The remaining chapter in this part of the book is concerned with stylistic variants and stylistic values, thereby preparing the way for Part II, which deals with aspects of style. The book concludes with a set of passages and questions to guide the student stylistician in producing relevant analyses. The strength of these lies not only in their providing practice, in line with the well-tested theory that doing brings understanding, but also in the fact that the direction of the analysis matches in each case with a chapter from the main body of the work.

So, there we have our three texts. They differ significantly from one another in some respects - in format, in assumptions made, in ways in which the reader is invited to engage with the material. But their differences are dwarfed by their similarities - an almost tangible affection for two disciplines whose adherents should be allies not foes, a desire to heal the rift between them, clarity of method in how this might be achieved.

Try the books and join the authors in their efforts - you'll find it's worth while.

## FURTHER READING

Yet another aspect unites the three texts with which we have been dealing - their very helpful bibliographies/references/suggestions for further reading. The following is just a small selection.

D. Birch, *Language, Literature and Critical Practice: Ways of Analysing Text* (Routledge, 1989)

N.F. Blake, *Traditional English Grammar and Beyond* (Macmillan, 1988)

R. Chapman, *The Treatment of Sounds in Language and Literature* (Blackwell, 1984)

M. Cummings and R. Simmons, *The Language of Literature: A Stylistic Introduction to the Study of Literature* (Pergamon, 1983)

G. Leech, *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* (Longman, 1969)

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The English Association  
University of Leicester  
University Road  
Leicester LE1 7RH  
UK

Tel: 0116 252 3982  
Fax: 0116 252 2301  
Email: [engassoc@le.ac.uk](mailto:engassoc@le.ac.uk)

Potential authors are invited to contact the following at the address above:

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