English Literary Stylistics

Christiana Gregoriou

Series editors' preface

The first three books to be published in the Perspectives on the English Language series (Jeffries, *Discovering Language*, Chapman, *Thinking About Language* and Clark, *Studying Language*) together formed the first wave of what will ultimately be a comprehensive collection of research-based textbooks covering the wide variety of topics in English Language studies. These initial three books provide the basics of English Language description, theory and methodology that students need, whether they are specialists in English Language or taking only one or two modules in the subject. The idea was that these books would be used differently by such different students, and indeed they have already proved useful to postgraduate students as well as undergraduates.

Now we are beginning the process of adding to the series the envisaged set of higher-level textbooks which will build on the core books by bringing together the latest thinking in a range of topics in English Language. This 'second wave' comprises books written by current researchers in the field, and far from simply providing an overview or summary of work so far, these books are distinctive in making the latest research available to a student audience. They are not 'dumbed down', but are written accessibly, with exercises and questions for the reader to consider where relevant. And for the HE teacher, these books provide a resource that s/he can use to bring out the best in students of all abilities.

The book you are holding will ultimately be part of a large series of topic-based books in English Language, and we are confident that you will find them useful and interesting. Although this series was begun with only one series editor, the rate of production of the second wave calls for more help in editing and proofreading. We look forward to surfing this second wave together!

Lesley Jeffries and Dan McIntyre
June 2008

Acknowledgements

Contents

Introduction: An Overview of Literary Stylistics

▌ What is 'style'?

What do you understand by 'style'? In the word's everyday sense, it can be used to talk about such things as fashion, music and architecture, in addition to writers and their language, and seems to be a word with positive connotations. To say that a woman has style or that a house is decorated with style is a positive evaluation. In one definition, the *OED* states that this word refers to '[t]he manner of expression characteristic of a particular writer (hence of an orator), or of a literary group or period; a writer's mode of expression considered in regard to clearness, effectiveness, beauty, and the like', and is hence '[u]sed for: A good, choice or fine style'. In this sense, to talk about a text carrying 'style' is similarly something that could be thought of as positive. In the area of stylistics, however, the word 'style' is not thought of as a necessarily positive term (though admittedly authors tend to analyse texts they find of interest and therefore possibly 'value'; I myself am both a keen reader and analyst of crime fiction). Style is here instead used to refer to 'the way in which language is used in a given context, by a given person, for a given purpose and so on' (Leech and Short, 1981: 10): a perceived distinctive manner of expressing oneself with language, regardless of whether that manner is liked, appreciated, valued or not.

In stylistics, 'style' is interpreted as a property of all texts, as opposed to a property of literary texts exclusively. Besides, as Leech and Short (1981: 1) put it, 'to make progress in understanding style, one has to make use of an explicit understanding of language – not just language in a literary context'. Having said that, it is interesting to note that the *OED* does recognise that, in its figurative sense, style can be seen 'as a symbol of literary composition'. Entitling this book *English Literary Stylistics* therefore enables me to concentrate on

introducing features, frameworks and models relevant to the study of literary texts, though that is not to say that these are not applicable or indeed relevant to non-literary ones as well.[1]

As a student of stylistics, I found I had to struggle with a number of questions surrounding this issue of style. I wondered whether style elements were consciously or unconsciously 'inserted' by the writer. In other words, to what extent are writers aware of their linguistic choices? I suspect very little, if at all. Whilst undertaking some research into the metaphors of the criminal mind, I had the pleasure of meeting the crime fiction writer James Patterson,[2] whose work I had examined linguistically. I asked him whether he had consciously used particular megametaphors or sustained metaphors (see Werth 1999) such as CRIMINAL IS A MACHINE[3] and CRIMINAL IS AN ANIMAL when portraying the criminal mind in his own Alex Cross crime novels; interestingly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, he said that he had not. In fact, few if any authors would claim that they are aware of the linguistic nature of their style, whether they can employ the linguistic terminology to describe it or not.

I also wondered whether 'style' is indeed the same as authorial choice. The term 'style' has been applied to the 'linguistic habits of a particular writer ("the style of Dickens, of Proust", etc)' (Leech and Short, 1981: 11), but would it not be simplistic to assume that these 'choices' are merely down to the author? I agree with Short (2005) that '[b]y examining carefully the choices writers make, and comparing them with alternative choices which they could have made, we can relate those choices in a systematic way and detailed way to overall meaning and effect', but is that what style means? Surely one's choices are determined by a number of external as well as internal requirements, and style is not merely a choice between variant items or structures. Are there not a number of norms (say, generic features) that writers often need to conform to when producing literary texts? For instance, crime writers are, at least to some extent, restricted by the need for them to employ such characters as criminal(s), victim(s) and detective(s), not to mention an element of mystery, a surprise ending and so on. Do these choices have anything to do with their style, the authors' idiosyncratic linguistic habits?

I also contemplated whether style is about deviation[4] or the conforming to linguistic norms. Is deviation itself a factor in determining style? Wales (2001: 372) argues that it would be wrong to imply that style itself is deviant in the sense of 'abnormal', and there arises a need to match any text against linguistic norms of genre, period and language as a whole. Accordingly, I argue that style is generated by an interaction between on one hand, a text's sum of deviations from recognisable norms, and on the other, the extent to which it conforms to these norms.[5] For a crime novel to be 'readable', for instance, there would need to be enough features to identify it as a crime novel to start with (say, there needs to be a crime, an investigation, possibly an unknown

perpetrator and so on), but also enough features setting it apart from other novels on the same bookstore shelf, novels within the same genre (say, there might be some unexpected twists and turns in the given text's tale, new characters introduced halfway through to complicate the crime case, and so on).

Having dealt with some definitions and issues surrounding style, I next turn to define the field of stylistics. What does it mean to 'do stylistics', and why would anyone want to anyway?

Why should we do stylistics?

Even though stylistic analysis is often framed as a validation of reader intuition, the sort of insight that such an investigation can provide goes a lot further than that. Stylistics was, initially, born of a reaction to the subjectivity and imprecision of literary studies, and in short, attempted to put criticism on a scientific basis (see Fish, 1980; Short, 1982). In other words, literary criticism was thought of as imprecise and subjective, and so stylistics was born in order to objectify claims made about the way in which literary texts carry meaning. Note, however, that stylisticians, such as Wales (2001: 372), claim that stylistics 'is only "objective" (and the scare quotes are significant) in the sense of being methodical, systematic, empirical, analytical, coherent, accessible, retrievable and consensual'. Similarly, Simpson (1993: 3) points out that few stylisticians claim objectivity in their method of textual analysis, and that they 'prefer to recognize instead that all interpretations are in some sense context-bound and are contingent on the position of the analyst relative to the text'. My fascination with crime fiction as a *reader*, for instance, is bound to have an effect over the way in which I analyse such texts as a *stylistician*. Nevertheless, such clarifications fail to prevent literary critics from being suspicious of such an approach to literature, which they assume claims to be a purely 'objective' method of analysis.

'Stylistics, first of all, normally refers to the practice of using linguistics for the study of literature' (Simpson, 1993: 3). In other words, in offering linguistic operable principles to the study of literature, stylistics (hence sometimes called 'literary linguistics') possesses a *kind* of objectivity that literary criticism seems to lack. As Carter (1991: 5) puts it, practical stylistics is a process of literary text analysis, the basic principle of which is that without 'analytic knowledge of the rules and conventions of normal linguistic communication' we cannot adequately validate the readers' intuitive interpretations. Note that Fowler's (1986) term for stylistics is 'linguistic criticism'; stylisticians could be thought of as indeed critics of literature, but engage in this criticism through detailed and explicit knowledge of the workings of language.

Wales (2006: 213) defines 'linguistic stylistics' as those stylistic studies interested in the workings of language and in testing the validity of linguistic models. She opposes this to 'literary stylistics', which is regarded as a branch of poetics, primarily concerned with the classification of the essential properties or conventions of genres, or theories of form. The general understanding about the difference between linguistic stylistics and literary stylistics thus lies in the analyst's interests: whereas the linguist stylistician is primarily interested in language, the literary stylistician is most interested in literature. In several respects, linguistic stylistics is the purest form of stylistics, in that its practitioners attempt to derive from the study of style and language a refinement of models for the analysis of language, and thus to contribute to the development of linguistic theory (Carter and Simpson, 1989: 4). My entitling this book 'literary stylistics' does not reflect my lack of an interest in language, but it does highlight my fascination with literature and its effects, with genres and their conventions.

As Fish (1980: 28) put it, '[e]ssentially, what the method [of stylistics] does is slow down the reading process so that "events" one does not notice in normal time, but which do occur, are brought before our analytical attentions'. In other words, Fish argues that in engaging in stylistic analysis, students replace the question 'What does this sentence/text mean?' with the question 'What does it do?' He says that 'the text's meaning is transformed into an account of its experience', an event, something that happens, an experience the readers themselves actively participate in. Fish suggests that stylistics is the method, the machine which makes these experiences observable or at least accessible – it makes explicit what goes on below the level of 'self-conscious response'. He therefore called for 'affective stylistics', where instead of tracking the meaning of patterns on the page, stylisticians are invited to track understanding of what the reader is doing when encountering those patterns. In fact, Fish's call has received a response with the recent birth of cognitive stylistics or 'cognitive poetics', which, as Stockwell (2002: 1) puts it, 'is all about reading literature'; '*cognition* is to do with the mental processes involved in reading, and *poetics* concerns the craft of literature'. Cognitive poetics is a field that can be subsumed under stylistics and is clearly related to the discipline of literary criticism, as the former evaluates, or rather re-evaluates, the process of literary activity, yet it draws on theories that delineate the various processes of the human mind when interacting with literature. Put simply, cognitive poetics is a field that investigates what *happens cognitively* when we read. It is a field capable of, say, explaining how exactly twists work in a story, or how the reader is influenced into sympathising with certain personas in a play, and not others.

Fish (1980) also addresses the question, 'If there is a measure of uniformity to the reading experience, how come so many readers argue for a text's differing interpretations?' His response is that such disagreements are not about a

response, but about a response to a response: what happens to one informed reader will happen within a range of nonessential variation to another. In other words, Fish argues that varying interpretations are instead variations of the same interpretation, and it is only when readers become literary critics (an experience much removed from the reading experience) that opinions begin to diverge.

Short (1982: 61) has argued that the stylistic method's advantages are accuracy and clarity of presentation, along with that general characteristic of literary critical analysis of showing that superficially unconnected and previously unseen points can all be related in a particular overall analysis. However, he also argued that we ought to use linguistic stylistic analysis primarily as a means of supporting a literary or interpretative thesis, and further added that the analysis is likely to be of service to literary criticism if it follows its general aims and strategies. It is for this reason that stylistic analysis is often used in support of initial impressions about the 'interpretation' of literary extracts. Even though this might point to such analyses being those of specific readings and not analyses of texts, it needs to be kept in mind that this is a method of analysis that takes the reader as an actively mediating presence fully into account, and it is hence that individual reader's responses that it can describe with some precision.

Simpson (2004: 3–4) argues that doing stylistics is an illuminating method of analytic enquiry which sheds light on the very language system it derives from. It enriches our ways of thinking about language, and in telling us about the rules of language, it educates us about the extent to which we can bend or even break them. He suggests that the practice of stylistics conforms to the following three basic principles, cast as the three 'R's: stylistic analysis should be Rigorous (meaning that it should be based on an explicit structured framework or model of analysis), Retrievable (the terms and criteria the analysis is organised through have meanings which are agreed upon by other students of stylistics – there's a consensus on what means what in which context) and Replicable (the methods should be so transparent, that it would be possible for others to verify results, on the same text or others).

Put simply, this is a method that remains faithful to its principles as it talks about experience and focuses on effects. As Short (1996: 349) puts it:

> [l]ooking at writing in this kind of detail helps to reveal important aspects which might otherwise have gone unnoticed, and it also provides detailed and interesting ways of testing out or supporting critical hypotheses about style and meaning which we may have arrived at through our initial reading.

Nevertheless, Carter and Simpson (1989) claim that in the area of interpretation

lie problems. Firstly, it is naïve to assume that any application of linguistic knowledge can result in an objective, value-free interpretation of data; since the system of description 'will inevitably be partial (in both senses of the word) … so accordingly, will be the interpretation' (Carter and Simpson, 1989: 6). They raise further problems. The analyses of stylistics will simply provide the basis on which interpretations might be textually realised (the analyst has to be trusted on their interpretation of results). Also, any description or analysis is only as good as the model it came from. Finally, in describing data, analysts are necessarily interpreting data. It is a difficult if not impossible task for the analyst to engage in an unbiased description.

A further defect of stylistics lies in the absence of any constraint on the way in which we move from description to interpretation, with the result that any interpretation we put forward is arbitrary (Fish, 1980: 73). How do we get from describing, say, a poem as verbless, to the impression of inactivity or inevitability in the poem? Stylisticians therefore run the risk of making interpretative leaps and overgeneralisations, forcing dubious interpretations to particular linguistic patterns/hypotheses. A related danger lies in the stylistician attributing an independent meaning to linguistic facts. To stay with the same example, even if a verbless poem indeed brings out an impression of inactivity, that does not necessarily mean that other verbless texts will produce the same sort of effect. This is problematic; such facts are likely to have different meanings in different circumstances (see Simpson, 1993: 113 for a discussion of the danger in making direct connections between linguistic patterns and a particular world-view).

To add to these problems, in engaging in stylistic procedures, stylisticians run the risk of being rather circular in their argumentation. If stylistics is the means of supporting initial impressions about a literary thesis (Short, 1982), are we not running the risk of finding out exactly what we were looking for regardless of whether it is actually there or not?[6]

There are a number of lessons to be learnt from all these observations, but as Jeffries (2000) put it, we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Stylistics could and does work. It is a very useful tool to have to your disposal if you maintain some scepticism and try and be objective.[7] You should also not make the mistake of assuming that a particular linguistic pattern always means something, or that the techniques on offer are only relevant to the study of literary texts. In fact, the same stylistic tricks can be used for different effects, but they will have some common thread of meaning, albeit with the context altering the exact effect. To return to the example of the verbless poem, stylistics surely makes some progress by explaining why the lack of a verb is likely to reduce the consciousness of time in a text, given the structures of English.

The remaining of this book is, rather conventionally, categorised under the major genres of literature: poetry (Chapters 1, 2 and 3), prose (Chapters 4, 5 and

6) and drama (Chapters 7, 8 and 9). Chapter 1 delineates the terminology and features relevant to the study of poetry, while Chapter 2 is concerned with poetic foregrounding devices and metaphor. Chapter 4 outlines the narrative styles, the linguistic point of view indicators, and the speech and thought presentation frameworks relevant to the study of narratives. Chapter 5 introduces Possible World (see Ryan, 1991a, 1991b, 1998) alongside Text World (see Werth, 1999) theory, Emmott's (1997) frame theory, and schema theory, while also touching on frameworks surrounding the telling of stories (such as those by Labov, 1972 and Propp, 1975, 1984). Chapter 7 introduces theories relevant to the analysis of the form and structure of drama, and accounts for the study of dramatic characterisation. Chapter 8 introduces theories relevant to the study of dramatic conversational analysis. Whereas Chapters 1, 2, 4, 5, 7 and 8 introduce theories, the intervening chapters (3, 6 and 9) offer practice through a number of worked examples. The conclusion provides ideas for further stylistic practice.

1 Naming Poetic Parts

1.1 Analysing poetry

When it comes to poetry, stylisticians, much like literary critics, are concerned with explaining how the poem's form and structure contributes to the effects that it generates, and the ways in which the poem expresses the poet's ideas. However shared their tasks, the two sets of different commentators nevertheless operate at rather different levels of abstraction (Leech, 1969: 6). As noted in the previous chapter, a stylistician is more concerned with explaining in objective and reliable terms the way in which the *language* of the poem particularly contributes to its meaning. And it is for this reason that stylisticians often start by outlining their initial impressions of a text, after which they proceed to engage in detailed and systematic linguistic analysis of the art form to justify or explain these original intuitions.

But what makes poetry special or different from other literary art forms? The *OED* defines poetry as the 'composition in verse or some comparable patterned arrangement of language in which the expression of feelings and ideas is given intensity by the use of distinctive style and rhythm'. What appear to differentiate poetry from other imaginative, creative, or indeed fictional literary art forms are the notions of 'intensity' or emotional impact, coupled with 'style' and 'rhythm' in potentially 'verse' form. Therefore, one of the things we should consider is how to go about describing these 'verses', their 'rhythm' and their accompanying 'intensity'.

1.2 Rhythm and metre

'Rhythm' is something we perceive in many things, such as the beating of our