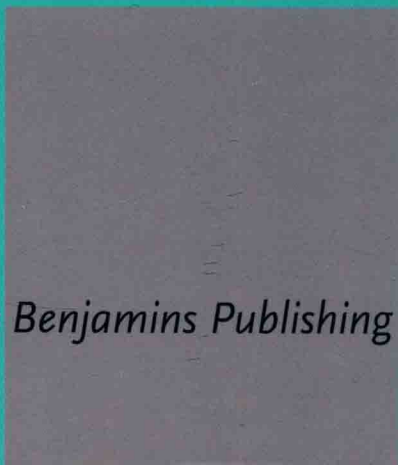


# Language, Discourse, Style

**Selected works of John McH. Sinclair**

**Edited by Sonia Zyngier**



*John Benjamins Publishing Company*

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*Edited by*

Sonia Zyngier

Federal University of Rio de Janeiro

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## Language, Discourse, Style

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## **Volume 22**

Language, Discourse, Style. Selected works of John McH. Sinclair  
Edited by Sonia Zyngier

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I am also deeply grateful to Ronald Carter and to Bill Louw for their contributions. But most of all, I am deeply indebted to John Sinclair, a most inspiring and generous mentor. He encouraged me throughout my career, taught me how to accept and take criticism, and trusted me with the editing of a selection of his works. I hope that, through this book, he will continue to be a source of inspiration to many, as he has been to me.

## Editor's preface

This book marks the completion of a long-awaited project by professionals, researchers and students interested in the integration of language and literature. In 2001, John Sinclair agreed that a collection of his works on teaching and stylistics could be useful to those dealing with this interface. However, other large projects took much of his time, and the present one was kept on the back burner, until now.

A free thinker, Sinclair was one of the most provocative, original and acknowledged linguists of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, who generously shared his ground-breaking ideas, inspired, and supervised generations of scholars. Always proposing future directions, Sinclair's production is still relevant to those seeking to develop more systematic and reliable analyses of verbal art in all its forms.

Indeed, John Sinclair is well-known for his work in corpus linguistics and for inaugurating the field of discourse analysis. His *Corpus, Concordance, Collocation* (1991) has been considered "the bible for a generation of corpus linguists" (Hoey 2007).<sup>1</sup> However, not enough is known about his contributions as a stylistician and a specialist of language and literature education. This volume fills in this gap.

By organizing his papers thematically and chronologically, this book provides a history of the evolution of John McH. Sinclair's contributions to stylistics, from textual to discursal approaches. In these pages, the reader will realize both the timeliness of his theoretical thinking and how it developed from 1968 to 1997. From his very early writings through the later ones, the production reflects his conversational, sharp and crystal-clear style. In his own words, "The competent writer is sensitive to his readers in a similar way to a competent conversationalist" (Chapter 10, Section 1).

This volume illustrates the constant concern of a keen stylistician, looking for practical applications and carrying out microanalyses without losing sight of the macro-level. It also shows that Sinclair always insisted on analysing language as it occurs. The earlier papers belong to a time before computers could be used in classrooms. Despite the technological developments of today, the methodological procedures he proposes and illustrates throughout this book remain relevant and

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1. In <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2007/may/03/guardianobituaries.obituaries>, accessed May 2016

his insistence on the need to look for ways that allow us to see beyond intuitions are still very much in line.

Not only because Sinclair was a careful, perceptive, and meticulous writer, but mainly in respect for his ideas, editing interventions have been kept to a minimum. The selected works include chapters, papers, and talks which have been published previously but in many different edited collections or journals. Here they have been formatted as chapters and presented in a coherent development. References that were forthcoming at the time of writing were attributed the date of publication and listed with the other ones at the end of the book. Titles for sections have been inserted at times for the sake of balance and uniformity.

For this volume, two of Sinclair's closest friends and long-time collaborators kindly agreed to contribute. Ronald Carter accepted to write the Introduction, and Bill Louw is responsible for the Coda, where he discusses the impact of Sinclair's work.

As the initial plan of organizing the writings into three parts had been previously reviewed by the author himself, this same structure was kept. Part I (Education, Language Teaching and Stylistics) contains four chapters on language pedagogy and curriculum issues. Here it is possible for the reader to understand Sinclair's concerns about how much theory teachers must know and his insistence that they should never lose sight of how language is used (Chapter 1). In Chapter 2, he offers a guideline for a curriculum where language and literature are integrated, as it is his understanding that mastering a language involves both linguistic and literary concerns. At the same time that linguists must take into account the aims and intentions of a speaker, and the effectiveness and quality of an utterance, literary analysts must understand that "the literary value of any literary statement is limited by the nature and quality of the language observation implied by it" (Chapter 2). In Chapter 3, Sinclair points out six features that students must know to be considered *linguistically aware*, including language productivity and creativity. Chapter 4 shows the evolution of Sinclair's contributions to language education once he had access to corpus studies. In this chapter, Sinclair does not deny intuition but illustrates how corpus evidence helps disclose patterns previously unnoticed by traditional grammars and that may have deep implications for language learning and literary interpretation. As regards teaching English as a foreign language, his suggestion is that teachers should focus on naturally-occurring language and make use of evidence that emerges from corpus work.

The five chapters in Part II (Linguistic Stylistics) provide practical bases for stylistics analyses of specific texts. To Sinclair, a poem is "a sample of a language; perhaps not a representative sample, but only carrying meaning because it can be referred to a description of a whole language" (Chapter 5). Thus, the chapters in this section offer categories that bring to light the structuring of poems. Chapter 5



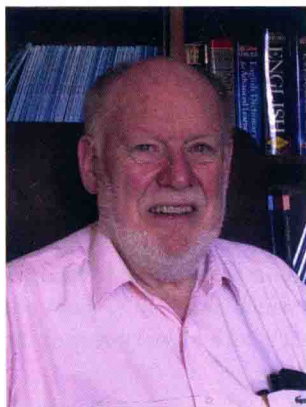
describes an experiment he carried out with his students using Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", arriving at the categories of 'analogy', 'revision', and 'approximation'. In Chapter 6, Sinclair analyses Philip Larkin's "First Sight" through an investigation of its sentence and clause structures, line and stanza boundaries, nominal, verbal and adverbial groups. He argues that aspects of meaning (what stylisticians do) can be described independently of evaluation (the task of literary critics). In Chapter 7, he describes how linguistic techniques may help the understanding of a literary text, in this case, "The Legs" by Robert Graves. Here Sinclair discusses 'acceleration', among other stylistic categories, always in search of meaning-carrying mechanisms that may bring together the public meaning of a text and the language patterns it is built on. Chapter 8 also examines meaningful patterning of a poem – Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" – and details 'focats' ('focusing categories') that operate at the intersection between language patterns and literary interpretation, including here 'arrest' and 'extension'. His proposal is that a theory of literary communication may emerge if a finite set of focats is obtained. In Chapter 9, Sinclair provides six properties for literary style that are also common to natural languages: (i) arbitrariness between sign and referent, (ii) arbitrariness between proposition and exponence, (iii) structural superfluity, (iv) derivational hierarchy, (v) idiom, and (vi) reference. Always aiming at clarity, these writings provide minute and accurate analyses and sparkle with new ideas and evidence-based interpretations.

In Part III (Style and Discourse), the five chapters centre on how literary texts can be explained in a systematic, reliable and retrievable way at the level of discourse. In Chapter 10, Sinclair sees poetic discourse as quasi-interactions and uses a method of description derived from spoken discourse. Chapter 11 provides even more substance to the integration between language and literature at the level of discourse. Here he looks at a poem ("Krishna" by Edwin Thumboo) from the perspective of discursal patterns. In Chapter 12, written as a keynote address delivered at the Poetics and Linguistics Association, the reader can find an unpretentious and quick-witted self-evaluation of Sinclair's academic trajectory, starting from his dissatisfaction with methods of literary analysis and moving towards a descriptive apparatus he considered more solid. Fictional worlds are dealt with in Chapter 13, where he states that "theories of language ignore fiction, theories of literature take it for granted, and philosophical works take up a variety of positions. This neglect is reflected in a tendency for fiction and non-fiction to be confused" (Chapter 13.1). To contribute with a model that distinguishes between fiction and non-fiction, he spells out the difference between fact and averral. Still looking at poems as verbal interactions, in Chapter 14 Sinclair explains an Elizabethan sonnet, providing evidence of its affinities to the conventions of spoken discourse.

From reflections about the interface between language and literature and its implications for teaching and curriculum planning through detailed analyses of text and discourse, this volume is invaluable to stylisticians, language and literature teachers, syllabus designers, college and university undergraduates, postgraduates and lecturers in the field. Most of all, it shows an inquisitive, independent scientist humble before knowledge, in constant pursuit of criticism and challenges.

A true Scotsman, John Sinclair used to celebrate Robert Burns's national day (Jan 25th) in a kilt, reciting "Address to a Haggis". Like Burns, Sinclair managed to convey complex ideas in the most economical phrasing. Much like the poet, Sinclair's style was witty as many of the texts here testify. On March 13th, 2007 he departed prematurely leaving numerous plans unfinished. With this book, we bring one of them to completion.

Sonia Zyngier, May 2016



*John McHardy Sinclair* (14 June 1933–13 March 2007)

# Introduction

## John Sinclair: Papers on Stylistics by Ronald Carter

*It is my belief that a new understanding of the nature and structure of language will shortly be available as a result of the examination of large collections of text. The language looks different when you look at a lot of it at once....*

(Sinclair 1991: xvii)

### John Sinclair: Academic worlds

John Sinclair (1933–2007) is one of the major figures in the field of linguistics. In a world of hype in which every academic appears to be undertaking cutting-edge research or to be paradigm-shifting or to be ground-breaking or internationally renowned, it is difficult to find words other than clichés to describe John Sinclair's achievement. It is perhaps merely sufficient to say that, like the production of J.R. Firth, by whom John was much influenced, his work will still be read and consulted fifty years from now; and that can be said of only very few academic researchers. And of very few can be it said that they have laid influential foundations for the establishment of two new academic sub-disciplines.

John Sinclair has a remarkable breadth of publications. He wrote and edited over thirty books and more than 100 articles in the fields of grammar, vocabulary, discourse analysis, lexicography, stylistics, language teaching and corpus linguistics and in the process laid significant foundations for two new sub-disciplines: those of spoken discourse analysis in the 1970s and corpus linguistics in the 1980s.

And in the 1980s he developed one of the largest-scale English language research projects the world has seen which produced the 400 million-word Bank of English corpus and resulted in a whole range of innovative dictionaries, grammars and teaching materials as part of the COBUILD project. Published in 1987 and dismissed at the time by most major publishers, the first COBUILD dictionary was so influential that all dictionaries and reference books, especially those for learners of English, are now based on corpora and have been affected by the principles of description and research which John Sinclair developed. In the 1990s and to the present day he has continued to innovate and push back frontiers of description, most markedly in the computational analysis of patterns of vocabulary and

grammar and has continued to develop accounts of the central importance of lexis in the theory of language.

John Sinclair is in a distinct tradition of British linguistics and applied linguistics which owes much to the foundations built by Professor J.R. Firth in the 1950s and extended by Professor Michael Halliday from the 1960s. In theory and practice, it runs counter to the dominant worldwide traditions for the study of language instigated by Noam Chomsky in the 1950s and 1960s. For Chomsky, language is a cognitive, biological phenomenon and has to be studied largely by means of methodologies which trust the intuitions of the researcher concerning language structure.

The position of John Sinclair is determinedly against such an orientation to language description and theory. Sinclair firmly holds the Firthian perspective which states that language should be studied as far as possible in naturally occurring social contexts of use, that it should work with extended examples (where possible complete texts), and should have at its centre the analysis of meaning. Indeed, at the heart of Sinclair's view is the inseparability of form and meaning.

[...] in all cases so far examined, each meaning can be associated with a distinct formal patterning [...] There is ultimately no distinction between form and meaning [...] [The] meaning affects the structure and this is [...] the principal observation of corpus linguistics in the last decade. (Sinclair 1991:496)

This descriptive and analytical position regarding the inseparability of form and meaning has exerted a major influence on research into and analysis of language within the past decade. It has affected the design of pedagogical materials such as dictionaries and grammars, the place of linguistics in education, the analysis of literature and the fields in particular of discourse analysis and lexicology. It is a deeply and uncompromisingly empirical position. The key word for Sinclair is *evidence*. By 'evidence' he means the data provided by extensive multi-million word collections of texts together with the statistical support provided by the techniques of corpus linguistics. It also means an uncompromising rigour and descriptive detail when it comes to the analysis of the language used in literary texts.

### John Sinclair: Language and literature worlds

What, therefore, can be said to be the core messages offered by John Sinclair for the study of language and literature?

First, literary texts are special texts. He believed that, if not central, they should certainly not be peripheral to the study of language and linguistics. For Sinclair, literary texts are instances of language in use and he regretted that such

texts were commonly neglected by linguists. Indeed, they represent for him a particular challenge as they involve processes of communication which are essentially displaced and indirect; the levels or planes of communication cannot be directly attributed to the voice or voices or 'authorial' positions in the text and such indirectness represents a particular challenge to description. He also regretted the relative neglect by literary scholars of the uses of linguistic methods in the exploration of literary texts; he believed very strongly that language and literary study could be integrated. He continued to be gratified by the increasing growth of language studies in departments of English and the continuing development of programmes, from high school through to postgraduate university courses, that promote this integration.

Second, literary texts are continuous with all other texts. Literary texts are commonly accorded special value within a community or culture and are also sometimes often taken as a sole point of departure for the study of English in educational institutions worldwide. Sinclair was, however, committed to the study, description and evaluation of a wider range of texts and believed that literary texts are an important focus but should not form an exclusive focus of study for English degrees. The study of English should be sufficiently catholic to embrace a wide a variety of texts and text types.

Third, if literary texts are to be studied within a framework of language and linguistics, then it should be done properly. By properly, he means that the text itself cannot be overlooked or be seen simply as some kind of illustration of general points about an author's life or about literary and cultural history or simply as the source of hermeneutical dispute. Every detail of the text has to be examined if a true picture is to emerge and that a text has to be seen not autonomously but as part of a network of other texts. In the latter stages of his research, that network is illuminated by reference to corpus databases as well as by corpus linguistic techniques so that statements made have to be verified with reference to other texts of the same or similar or of different types, each with their own disposition of linguistic features and each with their own provenance in the corpus. Descriptions of language are corpus-driven in that the corpus tells us what the facts are. And the larger and more representative the corpus the greater the attestation which is possible. It is a positive extension and enrichment of the Firthian tradition. As John Sinclair himself puts it in one of his most definitive books *Corpus, Concordance and Collocation* (1991: 4), "The ability to examine large text corpora in a systematic manner allows access to a quality of evidence that has not been available before." Literary texts draw from the same sources of language in use as any other text and should, according to John Sinclair, be examined in the same way.

Fourth, texts defined as literary are highly regarded. They may be valued differently at different times and by different reading communities but they can be

appreciated by the extent to which they endure over time. However, the notion of evaluation needs to be interrogated more fully at the interfaces between language use and all types of texts; this needs to be especially so at the interfaces between language and literary text. Such a practice is also central to the pedagogies underlying the teaching of language, of literature and of both in an integrated way.

For Sinclair, evaluation could not be said to take place unless the analyst gave a detailed, replicable and retrievable account of the linguistic constituency of the text. Too often, he would argue, literary critics become preoccupied with everything and anything except with the way that language works. Or, if they do consider language, discussion is undertaken at best impressionistically. For him, literature is made from language. He was not so naïve as to believe that meaning was wholly a text-immanent matter but language is the primary medium of a literary text and evaluation has to start and stop with the ways in which the language of that literary text is used. There are numerous exemplifications of this position and practice in this volume from the earliest days of the paper “Taking a Poem to Pieces” on a contemporary poem by Philip Larkin (Chapter 6) through to the paper “Passion Speechless Lies” on an Elizabethan sonnet (Chapter 14). In some cases, such as in his analysis of the Larkin poem, he would almost deliberately court charges of reductiveness and would stop provocatively short of any interpretation of the text, as if to underline the primacy of replicable description.

He stood, of course, for more than these four main foci and the volume of his papers here illustrates this abundantly; but these themes and concerns recur throughout all the papers over the many years they represent and have been highly influential on the field of stylistics.

## Beginnings and endings

If I may be allowed a final personal note, I count myself extremely fortunate to have worked with John Sinclair over a period of thirty years. He supervised my Ph.D. at the University of Birmingham and was editor of a series which published two of my earliest books. Together we edited a series for OUP called *Describing English Language* and we worked together closely on *Trust the Text*, published by Routledge in 2004, and in which many of his most significant and influential papers on discourse and corpus linguistics were collected and re-edited.

As is often the case with the most major scholars, John Sinclair was a deeply modest man who taught those whom he supervised as postgraduates to become independent researchers, encouraging them to pursue challenges over a long period of time, as he did. He did not fear criticism and indeed often sought it out as a way of enabling him to challenge the tenets of his own thinking. He was

naturally combative, sometimes acerbically, but more often with a light and ironic touch. John was a kind man and endlessly supportive to friends and family. He was unfailingly generous with his time. Once you had his confidence he would never let you down; and he was always willing to share his ideas and analyses in a spirit of collaborative endeavor. He remained throughout Scottish at heart and was proud of it.

It is no more than yet another cliché to say that he continues to be much missed by many and that his inestimable influence will live on. But then clichés, like hype, are sometimes true. This volume is an eloquent and truthful testimony to all that he stood and stands for at the interface between language and literature.

Professor Ronald Carter  
School of English Studies,  
University of Nottingham and  
Cambridge Language Sciences,  
University of Cambridge.

June 1, 2016



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