Linguistics and the Novel
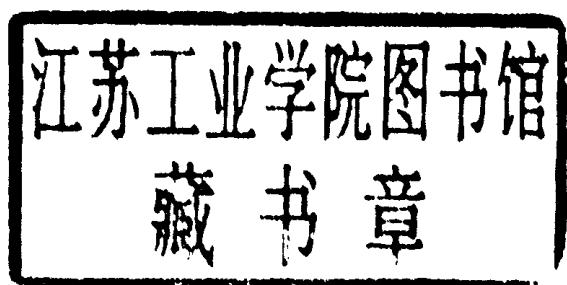
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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

I T is easy to see that we are living in a time of rapid radical social change. It is much less easy to grasp the fact that such change will inevitably affect the nature of those disciplines that both reflect our society and help to shape it.

Yet this is nowhere more apparent than in the central field of what may, in general terms, be called literary studies. Here, among large numbers of students at all levels of education, the erosion of the assumptions and presuppositions that support the literary disciplines in their conventional form has proved fundamental. Modes and categories inherited from the past no longer seem to fit the reality experienced by a new generation.

New Accents is intended as a positive response to the initiative offered by such a situation. Each volume in the series will seek to encourage rather than resist the process of change, to stretch rather than reinforce the boundaries that currently define literature and its academic study.

Some important areas of interest will obviously be those in which an initial impetus seems to come from linguistics. As its title suggests, one aspect of *New Accents* will be firmly

located in contemporary approaches to language, and a central concern of the series will be to examine the extent to which relevant branches of linguistic studies can illuminate specific literary areas. The volumes with this particular interest will nevertheless presume no prior technical knowledge on the part of their readers, and will aim to expound the linguistics appropriate to the matter in hand, rather than to embark on general theoretical matters.

Modern linguistics has also provided a basis for the study of the totality of human communication, and so ultimately for an analysis of the human role in the world at large. It seems appropriate, therefore, that the series should also concern itself with those wider anthropological and sociological areas of investigation which, deriving from the linguistic model, ultimately involve scrutiny of the nature of art itself and of its relation to our whole way of life.

This in turn will require attention to be focused on some of those activities which in our society have hitherto been excluded from the prestigious realms of Culture. The disturbing realignment of values which this involves, and the disconcerting nature of the pressures that work to bring it about both constitute areas that *New Accents* will seek to explore.

Each volume in the series will attempt an objective exposition of significant developments in its field up to the present as well as an account of its author's own views of the matter. Each will culminate in an informative bibliography as a guide to further study. And while each will be primarily concerned with matters relevant to its own specific interests, we can hope that a kind of conversation will be heard to develop between them: one whose accents may perhaps suggest the distinctive discourse of the future.

TERENCE HAWKES

PREFACE

THERE are a number of recent developments in and around linguistics which deserve to be better known to literary critics, for they point to original ways of reading and analysis; and literary criticism, as a discipline, has always welcomed innovation. Some of these developments suggest to me a new approach in the criticism of fiction, and in the present book I have attempted to draw together several threads in a preliminary sketch of the new method. I have been very eclectic, drawing on several approaches.

Chomsky's transformational grammar provides an interpretation of the traditional notion of 'style' as a relationship between meaning and expression. Halliday's 'functional' approach encourages us to think about *why* a language-user chooses one sentence-structure rather than an alternative, and Halliday provides some valuable terminology for our answers to such questions. I will be using these modes of linguistic description to focus particularly on the ways individual sentences add up to a larger textual shape; on their power to suggest distinctive 'mind-styles' in authors and characters; and on the relationships between 'voices' within the novel – a topic suggestively treated in the writings of a school of Russian linguist-critics founded by Mikhail Bakhtin in the 1930s. Their major work is now

available in English, and is strongly recommended.

The main preoccupation of the present book is the significance, for the novel-reader and critic, of sentence-structures, and of 'transformations,' both in the individual sentence and cumulatively in a complete work. That is to say, my descriptive analyses, and generalizations from them, are based on an established (though unconventionally eclectic) model of 'sentence-linguistics'. But I see this kind of study as, ultimately, only one part, if the most important, of a linguistic theory of the narrative text. Contemporary linguistics is moving to a realization that it must extend its scope beyond the traditional domain of the sentence to take in the structure of whole texts. This new 'text-linguistics' – being developed mainly in the Netherlands and Germany – is still very programmatic, and tentative in the detail of its proposals. I have drawn some general ideas from text-grammar. Assuming that a text has an overall structure analogous to that of a single sentence, I have derived from this analogy some general structural notions such as 'discourse', to work in co-operation with established literary concepts of the 'elements' of the novel. Another example of my use of the analogy occurs in the analysis of 'character' and 'theme' which draws on semantic features like those proposed for the descriptions of the meanings of single words (see pp. 33–41). Many other applications of the sentence/text analogy can be envisaged, but they are perhaps too ambitious for the present. For instance, one might conceive of deriving the surface structure of a whole text from an underlying 'theme' in the same fashion as a sentence surface structure is derived by a linguist from semantic 'deep structure'.

Text-grammar is compatible with another relevant current trend: the structural analysis of narrative and of myth as practised by French writers like Roland Barthes, Tzvetan Todorov and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Because structuralism is the subject of another volume in this series

(Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*), I have made only cursory reference to it. I am not one of those Anglo-Saxon critics who maintain that French structuralism is merely intellectually frivolous, or absurdly reductionist. Describing plot structure and theme, and the roles of protagonists, in ways which relate these structures to potential universals, seem to me valid and important enterprises in the theory and history of the novel. My relative neglect is a simple case of division of labour.

The French distinguish two levels of literary structure, which they call *histoire* and *discours*, story and language. Story (or plot) and the other abstract elements of novel structure may be discussed in terms of categories given by the analogy of linguistic theory, but the *direct* concern of linguistics is surely with the study of *discours*. So I have referred to the general linguistic theory of narrative only as a means of supplying a framework within which my own work, on the language proper of fiction, has, I hope, a defined place. (For further discussion of the broader framework of linguistic-literary structuralism, see the books by Culler, Hawkes and Scholes cited on p. 139 below.)

I have also economized on space by omitting some other topics which manifestly belong to 'the language of fiction'. For instance, I have nothing to say about conventions for the representation of dialogue, or of dialect speech; no discussion of figurative language, e.g. thematically significant iterative metaphors; nothing on creatively deformed or deviant language of the *Finnegans Wake* kind. I don't regard these topics as unimportant, far from it: these aspects of language structure contribute immediately to style and tone. But their analysis doesn't demand a very sophisticated technical linguistics, and they have already been treated by such critics as Lodge and Page (see pp. 138 and 140 below). In this short book I have concentrated on topics which need a more advanced linguistics, and which demand that linguistics should be used progressively, not just as a source of de-

scriptions that can be phrased just as well in critical language.

It becomes very clear to anyone working on the theory of fiction that the general statements about the novel one is prepared to commit oneself to depend on one's view of the *history* of prose fiction. What, for the critic and his reader, is the 'typical' novel? We are talking about a massive and highly diverse collection of works, written in many different circumstances over a period of more than two hundred years. There is no typical novel. The critic creates *his* typical novel by selecting from the literature, and by discussing his selections in the way he chooses. The theorist, knowing this, ought to be as explicit as he can about his version of the history and diversification of the novel. I don't have the space to furnish my history of the novel here, and I am conscious of many places in this book where qualifications and explanations have had to be skimped. I have tried to use expressions like 'many novelists' and 'usually' circumspectly, and can only hope that my implied ideal novel is not felt to be too eccentric or too archaic.

A word about the arrangement of this volume. The first two chapters introduce the major technical concepts used by the argument. Chapter 1 offers some relevant ideas from linguistics; chapter 2, a scheme of 'elements' of novel-structure derived from the linguistic categories. Chapters 3 and 4 consist largely of illustrative analyses within some of the areas of language structure defined earlier. Chapter 4, 'Discourse', also discusses topics which are closest to the centre of the linguistic study of the novel as I see it at the moment. Chapter 5 is intended as a brief conclusion and a prospect at the same time: it attempts to place the preceding material in perspective by offering an account of the role of structure for the individual reader and the community of novel-readers. It concludes by suggesting some lines for future work which might be based on this broader perspective.

Throughout the book my presentation of the material and of the case derived from it is cumulative or progressive. My position on this new subject is not authoritative or inflexible, and I have tried to give the reader a sense of flexible development by leading him through an argument which works itself out and modifies itself as it proceeds. The book is best read straight through the first time, and then perhaps re-read skipping forwards and backwards, applying different parts of the argument to passages I have quoted in another context.

While writing this book I have received invaluable help from students at the University of East Anglia in Britain, and at Brown University in America, who thrashed out many of the ideas with me in seminars; from Malcolm Bradbury and Terence Hawkes, who helped me remove confusions from early drafts; and from Lesley Nguyen and Muriel Utting, who did much of the typing. Peter Fowler helped me to correct the proofs.

CONTENTS

1 PRINCIPLES

Introduction: criticism, language and fiction

THIS little book offers a new perspective on the criticism, and therefore the reading, of novels and other forms of narrative prose: a viewpoint provided by *linguistics*. How does the current state of novel-criticism lead me to choose this perspective, the perspective of a science devoted so far to the study of 'ordinary language' and not originally designed to cope with extended fictional works?

Over the last two hundred years, the novel has become the dominant form of literary writing in most literate societies; in quantity (thousands of titles published every year in America and in Western Europe), readership consumption (verse and drama are now truly minority pleasures) and in cultural sensitivity (novels rapidly and significantly reflect, and help to shape, the socio-economic realities and the fantasies of their consumers). The novel is also the literary form most vitally in contact with other contemporaneous modes of discourse: with journalism, advertising, documentary, history, sociology, science and (in another medium) cinema. As the novel has become the most significant form of literary writing, its growth has coincided with the establishment of an age of literary-critical

consciousness: 'literature' a global concept unimagined in the value-loaded modern sense before the mid-nineteenth century – has become an established cultural institution, and 'criticism' is a massive secondary institution obligatory in universities, publishers' lists and newspapers.

Until very recently, criticism of the novel, and theories of the novel and its close relatives, were at a much more primitive level than the theory and criticism of poetry. Classical literary theories made no provision for the novel, since it was an unknown mode of writing; and when it did emerge, it didn't easily fit the surviving classical categories: it was not clearly epic, or lyric, or dramatic; or comic or tragic; or poetic, or philosophical, or historical. In 1742 Henry Fielding humorously captured the indefinite or chameleon status of the novel when he referred to his *Joseph Andrews* as 'a comic Epic-Poem in Prose'. Even today, some critics, doubtless influenced by the polymorphic, inclusive, quality of arch-modern novels such as *Ulysses* (1922) suggest that the essence of the genre is that it draws upon the forms of all and any genres. Others – and only in this century – have sought to devise a more specific 'poetics' for the novel form. The novelist Henry James, with the Prefaces to the New York edition of his novels (1907–17), stimulated long overdue interest in such technical aspects of the composition of narrative fiction as point of view and temporal foreshortening. A quarter of a century later, it was still necessary for Mark Schorer, in an essay called 'Technique as Discovery' (1948) to insist on the primacy of technique in the expression of meanings and values in prose fiction – a principle long accepted in discussions of poetry. Wayne Booth's pioneering *Rhetoric of Fiction* appeared as recently as 1961. David Lodge's proposal, in *Language of Fiction* (1966), that the verbal analysis of New Criticism should be extended from poetry to the novel, seemed innovatory to some, yet the New Criticism had ceased to be a live critical programme

* See 'Further Reading', pp. 134–41, for this and other references.

at least a decade earlier. When Brown University started its periodical *Novel* in 1967, the magazine launched into a series called 'Towards a Poetics of Fiction' with the urgency of a zoologist hastening to record a vanishing species – for it was becoming fashionable to proclaim that the novel was dead or dying!

That dismal prognostication apart, there has been much (belated) creative theorizing and criticism on the technique of fiction in this century, and particularly in the last fifteen years or so. I stress the notion of 'technique' for several reasons. First, an attention to technique is the only foundation for an understanding of the nature of prose fictions, since they are inescapably artefacts, man-made objects with a place in a culture's technology and an individual's workmanly productivity. There is a dreadful tradition of vapid reviewing which treats novels as if they were unedited, uncrafted, windows on life – the reader is supposed to look straight through the words at the pictured characters and settings just as one peers out through a spotless pane on one's nextdoor neighbour. But the 'world out there' of the novel is an artifice constructed through the novelist's technique, and we must be inquisitive about the means by which this shaping takes place.

Second, a writer's technique is, immediately and ultimately, a craft in language: as Lodge says, 'the novelist's medium is language: whatever he does, *qua* novelist, he does in and through language'. The structure of the novel and whatever it communicates are under the direct control of the novelist's manipulation of language, and concomitantly, of the reader's recreative sympathy, his desire and ability to realize and release the technique from verbal clues deposited by the author. The linguistic character of novelistic technique is generally recognized by critics; so it would seem natural and desirable to submit the language of fiction to any of the processes and terms of linguistic analysis which appear appropriate to the tasks of criticism.

The naturalness of this application is enhanced if we conceive of linguistics not just as a device for formalistic analysis capable only of tracing the outline, texture and contours of a text, but as a mode of analysis which can suggest *interpretations* of structural form. Choices of words and sentence-types possess conventional reverberations, associations, for members of a reading community. If we employ a linguistics which is sensitive to these community associations of language (a linguistics which treats the sociological and psychological aspects of language), we can begin to interpret a writer's linguistic structures in relation to the values and preoccupations of the community for which he writes.

There is another, though not essential, reason why we should approach the novel primarily by way of technique, and desirably by way of linguistics. In this century, the novel has become the major medium for technical innovation in European and American literature, and the innovations are generally directly expressed in linguistic creativity. One immediately thinks of the new devices for rendering consciousness discovered by Henry James, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, William Faulkner; of Joyce's triumphant and creative destruction and reconstruction of the language of the classical bourgeois novel in *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939), instituting a tradition rich in verbal play and carried on by Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov, John Barth and many slighter figures; of the experiments with structure and perspective made familiar by the work of the Argentinian Jorge Luis Borges and by the exponents of the French *nouveau roman*. Although experimentalism is not a novelty in the history of fiction, the strong insistence in much of this new writing on the linguistic nature of fiction itself is significant. These new techniques in prose fiction are a stimulus to structural criticism, and particularly to criticism closely engaged with language; so it has proved in France, where the writing of fiction and of criticism are now intimately interdependent, practised by

a homogeneous group of affiliated people, and sharing many features of formal invention. One *nouveau roman* (written in English), whose subject-matter includes linguistics, will be discussed in chapter 3 The situation in France is of especial interest to the joining of linguistics and prose fiction, and I will make further reference to the French structuralists' ideas about language and the technique of fiction. Though French structuralism is not linguistics, it does comprise a theory of communication and, having the classical language-theory of Saussure as a prominent part of its formative background, makes substantial use of linguistic concepts.

Text and sentence

I shall now set out some of the linguistic equipment which this book will call upon in the analysis of fiction. What I have to say is rather abstract, and I would like to forestall one specific possible confusion by a clear warning at the outset. I will be discussing the structure of two separate types of unit, *sentences* and *texts*.

In certain circumstances a text may consist of a single sentence, e.g. proverbs ('A stitch in time saves nine') or notices ('Please switch off the light'). Ordinarily, however, we can think of texts as constructed out of sequences of sentences. A sentence is an element, or unit, or constituent of a text; a text is made out of sentences in a quite ordinary sense of 'made out of'. The potential confusion is not in this idea alone but in the following feature of my argument: I shall maintain that texts are structurally *like* sentences (as well as being constructed out of sentences). That is to say, the categories of structure that we propose for the analysis of individual sentences (in linguistics) can be extended to apply to the analysis of much larger structures in texts. The reasons for this strategy will be indicated below. The effect will be to speak of, for example, nouns as elements in

sentence-structure and 'nouns' as elements in narrative structure; of the deep and surface structure of sentences and the 'deep' and 'surface' structure of texts. Since textual 'surface structure' consists of sentences, and sentences have their own surface and deep structures, there is some potential confusion here, but I hope that this will be substantially outweighed by the insights obtained from comparing text-structure with sentence-structure.

Deep structure and surface structure

In virtually every version of linguistic theory, a sentence is regarded as a combination of a 'form' and a 'content'. In modern transformational-generative grammar, the revolutionary style of grammar invented by Noam Chomsky, this is expressed as a pairing of a surface structure and a deep structure. Surface structure is the observable, or the expressive, layer of the sentence; most concretely, sound or written symbol; somewhat more abstractly, syntax: word-and phrase-order. Deep structure is the abstract content of the sentence: the *structure of meaning* which is being expressed. We experience surface structure directly, but retrieve deep structure, or meaning, only by a complex act of decoding.

Surface structure has important properties for the construction and reading of fiction. *Linearity* is one such property – sentences, but not their meanings, which are abstract, move from left to right in space or time, shifting the reader's attention along and sometimes impeding it. Linear sequence may be used to suggest narrative time, as in these sentences from Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929):

> . . . one of the doctors brought in Rinaldi. He came in very fast and bent down over the bed and kissed me. I saw he wore gloves.

The incident might have been expressed in quite some other