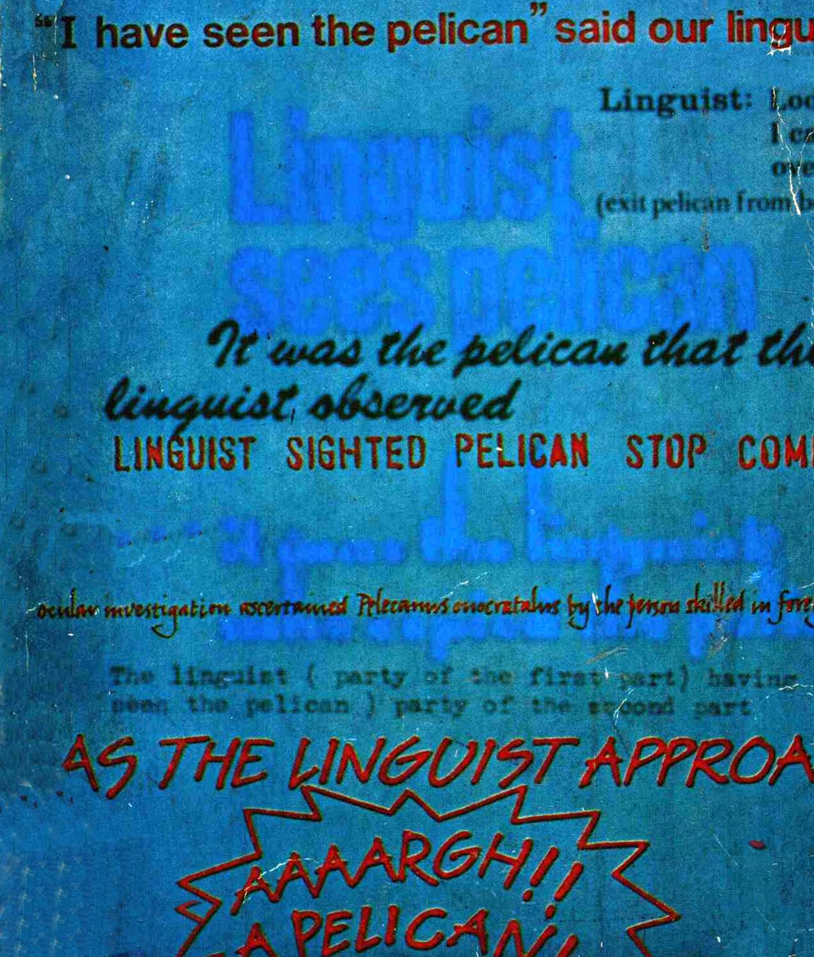
a Pelican Book

Stylistics

G. W. Turner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Pelican Books

Stylistics

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G. W. Turner was born in New Zealand in 1921 and received an M.A. from the University of New Zealand in 1948. He trained as a librarian, then worked for six years in academic and public libraries. From 1955 to 1964 he held a post in the English Department of the University of Canterbury, New Zealand, and since 1965 has been Reader in the Department of English at the University of Adelaide. G. W. Turner holds a Diploma in English Linguistic Studies from University College, London, and has contributed a number of articles on Old Icelandic phonology, Australian and New Zealand English, and grammatical topics to learned journals.
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Penguin Books

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth,
Middlesex, England
Penguin Books, 625 Madison Avenue,
New York, New York 10022, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood,
Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 2801 John Street,
Markham, Ontario, Canada L3R 1B4
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182–190 Wairau Road,
Auckland 10, New Zealand

First published 1973
Reprinted 1975, 1977, 1979

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Aylesbury, Bucks
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1. Language, Style and Situation

'Hello, darling', says a man to his wife. He says 'Hello, darling' to his neighbour's wife. He says 'Hello, dear' to his wife. An old lady says 'Hello, dear' to her pussy-cat. I write to the Commissioner of Taxes, beginning 'Dear Sir'. A young man says 'Hello, darling' to another young man. I call you 'Dear Reader'. I address the Commissioner of Taxes as 'Darling Sir'. A young man says 'Hello, dear' to another young man. A man says 'Hello, dear' to his neighbour's wife. I call you 'Darling Reader'. An old lady says 'Hello, darling' to her pussy-cat.

All very friendly. But we know that not all these events are equally likely to happen. This is because we have sifted from our experience of people saying things a pattern of language and another pattern of circumstances in which language is used, and we expect the language to fit the circumstances. We can see that in many cases words are interchangeable, that cats, unlike commissioners of taxes, may equally well be called 'dear' or 'darling', but we also know that these are different words, and that in other circumstances one word might be more appropriate than the other. Our knowledge of our language is immensely complex; we carry with us not only a knowledge of a vast, intricately patterned code, but also an experience of its varying surrounding circumstances. This guides us in making choices from approximately similar items in the code to fit particular occasions.

We know what language is, and we also know that it varies according to circumstances. Linguistics is the science of describing language and showing how it works; stylistics is that part of linguistics which concentrates on variation in the use of language, often, but not exclusively, with special attention to the most conscious and complex uses of language in literature. *Stylistics* is not a stylish word, but it is well connected. The French write of *la stylistique*; the Germans discuss *die Stylistik*. *Stylistics* means the study of style, with a suggestion, from the form of the word, of a scientific or at least a methodical study. The word allows the useful derivative *stylistician* for one who makes a methodical study of the principles of style. The stylistician is thus distinct from the stylist (sometimes markedly).

We know what language is in the sense that we can identify it or simply construct a sample of it. We would agree that I am using language now, though there is, when we think about it, something unusual about this language. As I sit at a desk in an outer suburb of Adelaide, looking from time to time out of my window on a day more overcast than we usually have, rather cold, in fact, for September, to see wind stirring our loquat tree and the gums beyond it, you are in London, or Canberra, or Leeds or Kuala Lumpur at another time and in circumstances quite unknown to me, so that the way you and I are using language in the present discussion is not the most normal one. As a matter of fact, it is more abnormal than I have suggested, since I have later revised and amended the words I wrote in Adelaide, looking out from time to time on a colder, more overcast day in Hampstead in March, taking account of comments made by two editors on a first draft of my text. Writing is a special, careful, elaborated, shuffled, pruned and tidied form of language, very different from the everyday, spontaneous, precarious adventures of speech which make up, and have made up, most of the world's linguistic activity and are in that sense 'normal language'. Yet the language of a philosopher or grammarian at his desk has often been chosen for description by grammarians and writers on the philosophy of language.

The grammarian who describes his own orderly, reflective language describes only one kind of English. He writes not *the* grammar of English but *a* grammar of English. He usually knows this, of course, though the schoolboy who accepts the grammar book as revealed truth may grow up with troublesome notions of correctness which condemn much of the language he really uses. It is certainly not to be thought that the grammarians and lexicographers who laboured to isolate or establish a 'correct English' from the flux of varied uses of language about them were unaware of other varieties of English. Dr Johnson, in the preface to his dictionary, notices the main types of variation that are noticed now. But the purpose of grammatical description is to bring orderliness and tidiness into a conception of language, and to do this it is necessary to begin by isolating one particular variety for systematic description. The most available, and the most manageable (because it is written, permanent and visible), is the formal written style of the scholar's own trade. This learned style is also the best described in the grammars of Latin which were the inevitable models for the first descriptions of modern languages. In our time, linguists have turned their attention to spoken language and its grammar, but they have frequently retained in their analysis the simplicity that goes with an approach to language through one single variety, this time by dismissing written language without further analysis as a mere partial reflection of speech. The grammars based on both speech and writing have tended in practice to concentrate especially on those patterns which are common to written language and formal speech.

Again the grammarian is not to be condemned. He is not interested in the surroundings of language; he does not want to know that I am now in Hampstead and you are in Smiths Falls, Ontario. In this he is like the mathematician who believes that if A or B alone can dig a garden in one hour, they will together finish the job in thirty minutes flat. No pauses for talk, no tangling of forks or argument about who begins at the sunny end enter his schematized world. The mathematician happily discusses a world which is patently absurd, a world in which people run baths by turning on two taps of different sizes and leaving the plug out.

For similar reasons, to concentrate attention on the essentials of a formal pattern, the grammarian is happiest in a world where the nuance and detail of real life and real language are subdued. From the ancient and medieval logicians he has inherited such favourite basic sentences as 'John runs', and with these he begins his work. Everyone knows that this is not real language, just as writers on elementary physics know that their friction-free models do not resemble the genuine problems of an engineer. No particular situation comes readily to mind in which the statement 'John runs' is likely to be usefully made. We think of no motive a speaker could have for saying it or interest it could have for a hearer. That is its merit. It eliminates certain variables, allowing the grammarian to get on with grammar.

How, indeed, could the grammarian, or, for that matter, the stylistician, begin to describe the intricate totality of a speech act? Consider, for example, two men standing together by the bar in the club-house of a golf-club. It is an overcast day in September. There are bottles on the shelves behind the bar. The lights are on, reflected in the bottles. Glasses have left wet rings on the counter. One of the men, Mr Alfred Appleby, an architect, notices that two of the wet rings touch, making a neat figure eight. He says to his companion, Mr Charles Plumtree, a draper, whose eyes, he notices, have been drawn by his own gaze to the wet rings, 'Makes a neat figure eight.' Mr Plumtree says 'It does.' As this conversation lapses, Mr Appleby says after a while, 'I hear your young John was doing very well in the hurdles at the school yesterday.' The reply is 'John? No, that was Roger, the younger boy. Roger's the hurdler. John runs.'

This, though I left much detail out, is already too much to deal with. To give ourselves a text of manageable length, let us play back and examine more closely only the last moment of this incipient conversation, 'John runs'. We could describe exactly where and how each man was standing as it was said, how many bottles were on the shelf, how old the men were, where the club-house was, where the men had gone to school and their careers in detail. Mr Plumtree's vocal movements could be analysed in all their complexity. We could note that the fading sound of the last word *runs* was made with the side rims of the tongue in close contact with the upper side teeth, and the tip and that part of the tongue which is just behind the tip pressed against the bony (alveolar) ridge behind the upper teeth in a way that allowed an audible sibilant escape of air, the nasal passage being meanwhile

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closed. The vocal cords had been vibrating while the *n* of *runs* was sounded, and this vibration continued into the portion of the word spelt *-s*, which was thus actually a *z*-sound, but with the voice cutting out before the sibilant sound ceased, so that, more finely, it was a *z*-sound terminating in a somewhat relaxed *s*-sound . . .

Now it is clear that this is likely to become a chaotic description of a scene, and to be both too full to comprehend and yet demonstrably incomplete. It is clear that some selection of essentials is necessary. Thus, unless the study is a special study of the exact sounds of speech, a phonetic study, it is unnecessary to analyse in detail the particular production of the last sound of *runs*. It is enough to note that it is a particular representation of the sound we hear at the end of *buzz*, in the middle and at the end of *roses* or at the beginning of *zero*. However they may vary in exact detail in particular productions, we recognize these sounds as *z*-sounds, or, to use the technical term, as the 'phoneme /z/'.

We do not consciously hear all the fine variations in particular pronunciations that a modern phonetician's machinery can measure. We sometimes ignore what we do hear, reinterpreting it in terms of an expected pattern. Such variant pronunciations as 'Empire Stape Building' or 'Hybe Park' are common in rapid speech, and are so much part of our language that they are taught to foreign learners to eliminate the over-precise flavour that a foreigner's speech often has, but few speakers of English are aware that they make these adjustments (technically called assimilations).

In other words, we interpret particular instances of language by referring them to a general scheme. We think of *stape* as a particular realization of *state*. In this, the grammarian or the scientific linguist proceeds as we all do. He, too, sifts from his experience of people saying things an abstract pattern of language, a 'form' and its 'formal elements'. The grammarian leaves to the phonetician the sound waves of physics, dealing himself with the elements of pattern for which the physical sounds are a basis. Grammar generalizes, finding similarities in pieces of language superficially different. It goes on to group 'John runs' with 'Dogs bark' in a wider concept 'subject plus verb', though the similarity between the two sentences is really very abstract. Grammar moves ever away from the particular to the general, ignoring the differences between male and female, childish and adult voices, or that recognizable twang that immediately tells his friends that Charlie Plumtree is talking. Perhaps when Mr Plumtree corrected Mr Appleby's mistake about the favoured sports of his boys, he spoke in the slightly chilled tone one uses when friends fail to distinguish one's very different and individual sons, but the grammarian puts such tones on one side as something additional to language proper (as 'paralinguistic features') to isolate an essential pattern of sounds and proceed to a methodical discussion of grammar. The grammar of 'John runs' will be built on an assumption of a sequence of seven minimal elements, or phonemes, together with the pauses, stresses (the varying 'weight' of the voice) and intonation patterns (or 'tune' of the voice) which unite such sequences into meaningful speech. Grammar will ignore such distinctions as 'male voice', 'chilly tone' and the voice quality which announces Charlie Plumtree's presence through a closed door.

Such distinctions are not, however, meaningless. We understand a chilly tone just as well as we understand the message 'John runs'. The tone of a message is sometimes the first part to be understood and was the only part of Othello's words that Desdemona had understood when she protested 'I understand a fury in your words, but not the words'. The speech of an actor or an evangelist depends for its effect on nuances outside the bare scheme of language. Even written texts have their particularity, appearing in a particular typeface and existing before they reach the printing press in a succession of handwritten and typed versions. When I wrote this paragraph in its first draft, the sentence I am now writing began with the second word in a line of my handwriting. As the paragraph is rewritten, typed and printed, this position changes. This does not matter (though such things perhaps explain the cold unfamiliar rhythms which seem to emerge when one first sees one's work in print), and we would agree that the position of words in their lines in one of the drafts of the present book is a 'paralinguistic feature' of no significance. Yet the latent significance of such a detail is brought out in poetry, where lines end and begin at points determined by the writer, and these line-ends take on significance in the special circumstances of poetic language. In children's picture books even the turn of a page may be carefully planned by the author.

Grammar leaves out part of real language and we feel that what it leaves out, the detailed particularity of particular occasions, brings us nearer to what we mean when we talk of 'variation' or 'style'. Can we simply say that the very setting up of a grammatical scheme isolates for us the companion study of stylistics? Is grammar what is said and style how it is said? Can style be defined as what grammar leaves out?

Only if these rough ideas are a good deal refined. The true nature of style is elusive and will need subtler nets than this to catch it. A very basic objection to this simple definition is that if by grammar we mean any attempt to find a scheme or pattern in language, such an approach would at the most allow us to contemplate style, not to describe it. The study of style, stylistics, must, like other branches of linguistics, generalize. Even to mention a 'chilly tone' is to classify Mr Plumtree's very individual pronunciation. In attempting to particularize, it adds a detail to the generalizations we can make about language: tones may be 'chilly'. We find an uncertainty principle at the very foundation of stylistics which ensures that however nearly its goal, if this is the particularity of language, is approached, it will never be reached. We might make narrower and narrower generalizations but we generalize to the last, until there is nothing left to do but quote. The lover of literature who fears that the academic critic will corrode poetry into a dust of arid comment worries unnecessarily. The full integrity of texts is guaranteed because it is impossible to capture particularity by multiplying generalizations.

Stylistics must therefore deal with a particularity it can never reach, ever indicating and lighting up what it cannot capture. Details are described in terms of other details; variations in the scheme of language are schematized. Merely to name 'variation' implies a scheme to vary from. The stylistician needs to begin with a theory of the linguistic scheme and relate it to particular speeches and writings, even if he is ultimately justified as the linguist not of our abstract competence in language but of our particular performances.

A distinction resembling the distinction between competence and performance underlies much of modern descriptive linguistic theory, and since F. W. Bateson once gave it as his opinion that it is the only useful contribution that linguistics has made to the study of literature, we had better look at it. F. de Saussure, in many ways a founder of modern linguistics, made a distinction between *langue* and *parole*: the language, thought of as an abstract pattern or scheme, and speech (to adopt the usual, somewhat unsatisfactory, translation of *parole*) or individual uses of language on particular occasions. The form 'John runs' belongs to the *langue*, Mr Plumtree's particular reproving pronunciation of it to the *parole*. The difference between *dear* and *darling* is a difference within the *langue*, but if a man whispers 'Darling!' in a particular way to a particular girl on a particular occasion we contemplate the *parole*.

Clearly the kind of distinction Saussure has made is useful for stylistics, but it does not immediately isolate stylistic choices. Evidence for stylistic choices is found in the *parole*, but an attempt to describe the nature of the choices that are made takes us back, as soon as we begin to use general terms, to the *langue*. Stylistic choices, like any other linguistic phenomena, are manifested in *parole* but described with reference to the *langue*. We cannot therefore merely take the relation of *langue* and *parole* as the model for an abstract scheme and stylistic variation.

One difficulty is that we cannot always agree whether what we observe belongs to the linguistic scheme or not. The relationship between scheme and variations is not given and absolute, but, like Mr Appleby's figure eight in the formal theory of wet rings on bar counters, a pattern discerned in language by linguists and, less methodically, by the users of language. There are, accordingly, several possible kinds of relationship between linguistic scheme and variation.

The most ambitious way to relate grammar and style is to try to incorporate all variations within the scheme by outlining general patterns of variation. Even the whispered performance of 'Darling!' is not inaccessible to generalization. Whispering can be described phonetically and its meaning discussed. Perhaps the man had reasons for not wishing to be overheard. Whispering is so often associated with secrecy that a man with acute laryngitis asking the doctor's wife 'Is the doctor in?' risks receiving the (also whispered) reply 'No – Come in.' On the other hand, the whisper perhaps showed strong emotion, and emotion is another reason for whispering. We might imagine that the hero in a melodrama, discovering the full extent of the villain's villainy, would whisper the words 'You devil!' (magnifying his whisper to a stage whisper to suit the needs of the theatre). Whispering, then, is not absolutely different from such recognized grammatical categories as questions or commands; at least a describable linguistic phenomenon correlates with describable general situations. To include everything in a 'grammar' is to risk an untidy and incoherent grammar, perhaps, but we shall see later that modern grammars are quite capable of establishing a hierarchy of grammatical categories and of deriving a multiplicity of surface phenomena from a coherent set of 'deep' structural forms by precisely defined operations. There may be little usefulness in including such phenomena as whispering on the surface fringe of such a grammar, but it is not theoretically impossible.

An all-inclusive approach, if totally successful, would abolish the distinction between scheme and sporadic variants by bringing all variation within the scheme. The user of language would find everything he could ever need in the multi-purpose kit supplied by the super-grammarian. His only remaining choice would be to take it or leave it.

But this is a real choice, introducing a second possible relationship between scheme and variations. It is possible to depart from an accepted scheme, whether all-inclusive or not, to produce a novelty by a creative jump. Dylan Thomas, writing in English but using the phrase 'farmyards away', extends the usual rules of

English in which phrases of 'distance away' normally begin with specific measures of length, as in 'miles away'. Creative leaps of this kind are not confined to poetry but are also found in slang and in technical language. When a wingless flying machine was dubbed a 'flying bedstead', words were brought together that had normally been kept apart to add a new idiom to the scheme of English, and the first humorist to say that his mate was 'as silly as a square wheel' went even further in joining unlikely yokefellows. A scheme of language is never complete and static, because language is always being put to new uses and adjusted to them, or resharpened for old uses, particularly for occasions where people like to be emphatic. Vocabulary, the least rigorously systematic part of language, is especially subject to innovation in this way.

Literary language establishes yet another special relationship with the scheme of language by using linguistic elements to build new schemes of its own, adding new rules of metre and line length, word order and the choice of vocabulary to the existing rules of ordinary language. These new schemes multiply the possibilities of scheme and variation in a complex way, allowing departures from ordinary language in accord with the literary scheme and departures from the literary scheme in accord with ordinary language.

The superimposition of literary schemes on the scheme of ordinary language creates a very interesting stylistic study because the two schemes are consciously played off one against the other, but the existence of multiple schemes is not in itself special to literary language. The English language is itself a complex interrelation of many different schemes. Scots English varies from American English and both from the English of the Caribbean. On a time scale, Old English (Anglo-Saxon) has a quite different grammar from Modern English and there is an infinite number of stages of development linking the two. Each individual user of English controls several different forms of his language. We speak and write, read legal language or a book on science, understand a ceremonial speech or the slang of our area and generation. Some of these differences are perhaps to be

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