



Stylistics

A resource book for students

Paul Simpson

STYLISTICS

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PAUL SIMPSON

A

B

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The Routledge English Language Introductions are ‘flexi-texts’ that you can use to suit your own style of study. The books are divided into four sections:

A Introduction – sets out the key concepts for the area of study. The units of this section take you step-by-step through the foundational terms and ideas, carefully providing you with an initial toolkit for your own study. By the end of the section, you will have a good overview of the whole field.

B Development – adds to your knowledge and builds on the key ideas already introduced. Units in this section might also draw together several areas of interest. By the end of this section, you will already have a good and fairly detailed grasp of the field, and will be ready to undertake your own exploration and thinking.

C Exploration – provides examples of language data and guides you through your own investigation of the field. The units in this section will be more open-ended and exploratory, and you will be encouraged to try out your ideas and think for yourself, using your newly acquired knowledge.

D Extension – offers you the chance to compare your expertise with key readings in the area. These are taken from the work of important writers, and are provided with guidance and questions for your further thought.

You can read this book like a traditional text-book, ‘vertically’ straight through from beginning to end. This will take you comprehensively through the broad field of study. However, the Routledge English Language Introductions have been carefully designed so that you can read them in another dimension, ‘horizontally’ across the numbered units. For example, Units A1, A2, A3 and so on correspond with Units B1, B2, B3, and with Units C1, C2, C3 and D1, D2, D3, and so on. Reading A5, B5, C5, D5 will take you rapidly from the key concepts of a specific area to a level of expertise in that precise area, all with a very close focus. You can match your way of reading with the best way that you work.

The index at the end, together with the suggestions for further reading, will help to keep you orientated. Each textbook has a supporting website with extra commentary, suggestions, additional material and support for teachers and students.

STYLISTICS

In this book, the twelve numbered units in section A introduce you to key concepts in stylistics. These introductions are compact and are ordered in a linear way, so if you read progressively through this section you can assemble a composite picture of the core issues in both stylistic theory and practice. Then, or alternatively, you can use the numbered units of section A to follow a particular strand through the book. The units which comprise section B develop the topic introduced in the equivalent numbered unit in section A. In this book in the Routledge English Language Introductions (RELI) series, B units are either illustrative expansions of the model introduced in A or surveys of important research developments in the relevant area of stylistics. For example, unit A3 sets out a compact model for the study of grammar and style. In B3 you will find some applications of this grammatical model to a variety of texts. In unit A6, the concept of transitivity is developed but the corresponding unit in Section B is in this case a survey of the uses stylisticians have made of this model over the years.

Of course, the most productive way of learning about stylistics is simply to do it. The units that make up section C provide the opportunity to try out and apply what you have learned from A and B. For example, following from A3 and B3, unit C3 offers a practical activity involving the exploration of patterns of grammar in a short poem. Similarly, following from A6 and B6, unit C6 offers a chance to investigate the concept of transitivity in different kinds of texts. Finally, section D allows you to read what other scholars have written on the relevant subject over the years and to this effect, it offers a wide-ranging selection of readings by some of the best known stylisticians in the world.

This then is the basic blueprint for the better part of the book. There are some minor exceptions: for example, the reading in unit D5, because of its broad subject matter, covers strand 7 also. As strand 8 includes a detailed workshop programme which goes right down to the micro-analytic features of textual patterning, the space for the reading has been vacated to carry extra practical material. Whatever its narrower variations in structure, the core organising principle of this book is that in every strand a key topic in stylistics is introduced, defined and then elaborated progressively over the remainder of the strand.

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SECTION A

INTRODUCTION

KEY CONCEPTS IN
STYLISTICS

WHAT IS STYLISTICS?

Some years ago, the well-known linguist Jean-Jacques Lecercle published a short but damning critique of the aims, methods and rationale of contemporary stylistics. His attack on the discipline, and by implication the entire endeavour of the present book, was uncompromising. According to Lecercle, nobody has ever really known what the term 'stylistics' means, and in any case, hardly anyone seems to care (Lecercle 1993: 14). Stylistics is 'ailing'; it is 'on the wane'; and its heyday, alongside that of structuralism, has faded to but a distant memory. More alarming again, few university students are 'eager to declare an intention to do research in stylistics'. By this account, the death knell of stylistics had been sounded and it looked as though the end of the twentieth century would be accompanied by the inevitable passing of that faltering, moribund discipline. And no one, it seemed, would lament its demise.

Modern stylistics

As it happened, things didn't quite turn out in the way Lecercle envisaged. Stylistics in the early twenty-first century is very much alive and well. It is taught and researched in university departments of language, literature and linguistics the world over. The high academic profile stylistics enjoys is mirrored in the number of its dedicated book-length publications, research journals, international conferences and symposia, and scholarly associations. Far from moribund, modern stylistics is positively flourishing, witnessed in a proliferation of sub-disciplines where stylistic methods are enriched and enabled by theories of discourse, culture and society. For example, feminist stylistics, cognitive stylistics and discourse stylistics, to name just three, are established branches of contemporary stylistics which have been sustained by insights from, respectively, feminist theory, cognitive psychology and discourse analysis. Stylistics has also become a much valued method in language teaching and in language learning, and stylistics in this 'pedagogical' guise, with its close attention to the broad resources of the system of language, enjoys particular pride of place in the linguistic armoury of learners of second languages. Moreover, stylistics often forms a core component of many creative writing courses, an application not surprising given the discipline's emphasis on techniques of creativity and invention in language.

So much then for the current 'health' of stylistics and the prominence it enjoys in modern scholarship. It is now time to say a little more about what exactly stylistics is and what it is for. Stylistics is a method of textual interpretation in which primacy of place is assigned to *language*. The reason why language is so important to stylisticians is because the various forms, patterns and levels that constitute linguistic structure are an important index of the function of the text. The text's functional significance as discourse acts in turn as a gateway to its interpretation. While linguistic features do not of themselves constitute a text's 'meaning', an account of linguistic features nonetheless serves to ground a stylistic interpretation and to help explain why, for the analyst, certain types of meaning are possible. The preferred object of study in stylistics is literature, whether that be institutionally sanctioned 'Literature' as high art or more popular 'noncanonical' forms of writing. The traditional connection between stylistics and literature brings with it two important caveats, though.

The first is that creativity and innovation in language use should not be seen as the exclusive preserve of literary writing. Many forms of discourse (advertising, journalism, popular music – even casual conversation) often display a high degree of stylistic dexterity, such that it would be wrong to view dexterity in language use as exclusive to canonical literature. The second caveat is that the techniques of stylistic analysis are as much about deriving insights about linguistic structure and function as they are about understanding literary texts. Thus, the question ‘What can stylistics tell us about literature?’ is always paralleled by an equally important question ‘What can stylistics tell us about language?’.

In spite of its clearly defined remit, methods and object of study, there remain a number of myths about contemporary stylistics. Most of the time, confusion about the compass of stylistics is a result of confusion about the compass of language. For instance, there appears to be a belief in many literary critical circles that a stylistician is simply a dull old grammarian who spends rather too much time on such trivial pursuits as counting the nouns and verbs in literary texts. Once counted, those nouns and verbs form the basis of the stylistician’s ‘insight’, although this stylistic insight ultimately proves no more far-reaching than an insight reached by simply intuiting from the text. This is an erroneous perception of the stylistic method and it is one which stems from a limited understanding of how language analysis works. True, nouns and verbs should not be overlooked, nor indeed should ‘counting’ when it takes the form of directed and focussed quantification. But the purview of modern language and linguistics is much broader than that and, in response, the methods of stylistics follow suit. It is the full gamut of the system of language that makes all aspects of a writer’s craft relevant in stylistic analysis. Moreover, stylistics is interested in language as a function of texts in context, and it acknowledges that utterances (literary or otherwise) are produced in a time, a place, and in a cultural and cognitive context. These ‘extra-linguistic’ parameters are inextricably tied up with the way a text ‘means’. The more complete and context-sensitive the description of language, then the fuller the stylistic analysis that accrues.

The purpose of stylistics

Why should we do stylistics? To do stylistics is to explore language, and, more specifically, to explore creativity in language use. Doing stylistics thereby enriches our ways of thinking about language and, as observed, exploring language offers a substantial purchase on our understanding of (literary) texts. With the full array of language models at our disposal, an inherently illuminating method of analytic inquiry presents itself. This method of inquiry has an important reflexive capacity insofar as it can shed light on the very language system it derives from; it tells us about the ‘rules’ of language because it often explores texts where those rules are bent, distended or stretched to breaking point. Interest in language is always at the fore in contemporary stylistic analysis which is why you should never undertake to do stylistics unless you are interested in language.

Synthesising more formally some of the observations made above, it might be worth thinking of the practice of stylistics as conforming to the following three basic principles, cast mnemonically as three ‘Rs’. The three Rs stipulate that:

- ❑ stylistic analysis should be rigorous
- ❑ stylistic analysis should be retrievable
- ❑ stylistic analysis should be replicable.

To argue that the stylistic method be *rigorous* means that it should be based on an explicit framework of analysis. Stylistic analysis is not the end-product of a disorganised sequence of *ad hoc* and impressionistic comments, but is instead underpinned by structured models of language and discourse that explain how we process and understand various patterns in language. To argue that stylistic method be *retrievable* means that the analysis is organised through explicit terms and criteria, the meanings of which are agreed upon by other students of stylistics. Although precise definitions for some aspects of language have proved difficult to pin down exactly, there is a consensus of agreement about what most terms in stylistics mean (see A2 below). That consensus enables other stylisticians to follow the pathway adopted in an analysis, to test the categories used and to see how the analysis reached its conclusion; to retrieve, in other words, the stylistic method.

To say that a stylistic analysis seeks to be *replicable* does not mean that we should all try to copy each others' work. It simply means that the methods should be sufficiently transparent as to allow other stylisticians to verify them, either by testing them on the same text or by applying them beyond that text. The conclusions reached are principled if the pathway followed by the analysis is accessible and replicable. To this extent, it has become an important axiom of stylistics that it seeks to distance itself from work that proceeds *solely* from untested or untestable intuition.

A seemingly innocuous piece of anecdotal evidence might help underscore this point. I once attended an academic conference where a well-known literary critic referred to the style of Irish writer George Moore as 'invertebrate'. Judging by the delegates' nods of approval around the conference hall, the critic's 'insight' had met with general endorsement. However, novel though this metaphorical interpretation of Moore's style may be, it offers the student of style no retrievable or shared point of reference in language, no *metalanguage*, with which to evaluate what the critic is trying to say. One can only speculate as to what aspect of Moore's style is at issue, because the stimulus for the observation is neither retrievable nor replicable. It is as if the act of criticism itself has become an exercise in style, vying with the stylistic creativity of the primary text discussed. Whatever its principal motivation, that critic's 'stylistic insight' is quite meaningless as a description of style.

Unit A2, below, begins both to sketch some of the broad levels of linguistic organisation that inform stylistics and to arrange and sort the interlocking domains of language study that play a part in stylistic analysis. Along the thread, unit B1 explores further the history and development of stylistics, and examines some of the issues arising. What this opening unit has sought to demonstrate is that, over a decade after Lecercle's broadside, stylistics as an academic discipline continues to flourish. In that broadside, Lecercle also contends that the term *stylistics* has 'modestly retreated from the titles of books' (1993: 14). Lest they should feel afflicted by some temporary loss of their faculties, readers might just like to check the accuracy of this claim against the title on the cover of the present textbook!

STYLISTICS AND LEVELS OF LANGUAGE

In view of the comments made in A1 on the methodological significance of the three Rs, it is worth establishing here some of the more basic categories, levels and units of analysis in language that can help organise and shape a stylistic analysis. Language in its broadest conceptualisation is not a disorganised mass of sounds and symbols, but is instead an intricate web of levels, layers and links. Thus, any utterance or piece of text is organised through several distinct *levels of language*.

Levels of language

To start us off, here is a list of the major levels of language and their related technical terms in language study, along with a brief description of what each level covers:

Level of language	Branch of language study
The <i>sound</i> of spoken language; the way words are pronounced.	phonology; phonetics
The patterns of <i>written</i> language; the shape of language on the page.	graphology
The way words are constructed; words and their constituent structures.	morphology
The way words combine with other words to form phrases and sentences.	syntax; grammar
The words we use; the vocabulary of a language.	lexical analysis; lexicology
The <i>meaning</i> of words and sentences.	semantics
The way words and sentences are used in everyday situations; the meaning of language in context.	pragmatics; discourse analysis

These basic levels of language can be identified and teased out in the stylistic analysis of text, which in turn makes the analysis itself more organised and principled, more in keeping so to speak with the principle of the three Rs. However, what is absolutely central to our understanding of language (and style) is that these levels are inter-connected: they interpenetrate and depend upon one another, and they represent multiple and simultaneous linguistic operations in the planning and production of an utterance. Consider in this respect an unassuming (hypothetical) sentence like the following:

(1) **That puppy's knocking over those potplants!**

In spite of its seeming simplicity of structure, this thoroughly innocuous sentence requires for its production and delivery the assembly of a complex array of linguistic components. First, there is the palpable physical substance of the utterance which, when written, comprises *graphetic substance* or, when spoken, *phonetic substance*. This