A LONGMAN PAPERBACK

Investigating English style

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Investigating English Style

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Foreword

The theory and practice of stylistics have been much bedevilled by the multiplicity of sharply different emphases that have been given to the notion of style itself. There are two that have clashed with what seem to be particularly detrimental effect: style as an evaluative index ('The style is poor' or even 'This has no style') and style as an intimate, individuating index ('Le style est l'homme même'). Shaw, in his preface to *Man and Superman*, may be taken as typifying the first of these. 'He who has nothing to assert has no style and can have none: he who has something to assert will go as far in power of style as its momentousness and his conviction will carry him.' As equally typical of the second, we may add Pascal to Buffon; in his *Pensées*, he speaks of the delight experienced on encountering a 'natural style', a delight springing from the consciousness not that we are in the presence of a writer and artist but that 'on trouve un homme'.

The authors of the present book might not deny that in the last resort Pascal is right: the whole 'gestalt' of a person's use of language is as individual as his finger prints – and much more obviously so to the ordinary observer; but they are concerned to establish a theory of textual comparison which will explain our recognition of other, broader and socially more generalisable varieties of language than what is referable to the individual. Nor, surely, would they claim that all examples of language use are equally pleasing; but they are concerned to give us analytic tools with which we can dissect and identify those features that any of us is free to like or dislike according to his taste and sense of literary values, if literary evaluation is his purpose.

Style is thus placed squarely (as is shown in the theoretical discussion of Part One) within the framework of general language variation and it follows that no reader should expect to find the field of inquiry even tending to be limited to poetry and belles lettres. Rather, the authors scrutinise the linguistic differences to be observed primarily within the

repertoire of English used in everyday life, and they divide their attention fairly evenly between spoken and written language – the former largely neglected by analysts of style in modern times. One additional feature should here be stressed. Again and again, the authors insist on confronting us with specimens of current English as it really works in actual situations, giving us not merely the experience of examining language (such as spontaneous conversation and broadcast sports commentary) that we have probably never had within our grasp before, but also the discipline of subjecting it to a kind of analysis which clearly isolates the most relevant features.

The importance of such work to students of literary style will be obvious, but of course its importance goes further. As English has increasingly come into world-wide use, there has arisen an acute need for more information on the language and the ways in which it is used. The present book has a welcome place in the English Language Series, which seeks to meet this need and to play a part in further stimulating the study and teaching of English by providing up-to-date and scholarly treatments of topics most relevant to present-day English – including its history and traditions, its sound patterns, its grammar, its lexicology, its rich and functionally orientated variety in speech and writing, and its standards in Britain, the USA, and the other principal areas where the language is used.

University College London
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RANDOLPH QUIRK

Preface

It is always dangerous to write an introductory book about a developing and controversial field of study, but in the case of stylistics, such a book is very necessary at the present time. A great deal has been published in and about the subject over the past few years, but there has been no attempt to provide a meaningful guide to the subject for the general reader. This deficiency is all the more unfortunate as so much of what has been published is extremely technical, provides but a partial account of the subject, and bears witness to a substantial amount of disagreement among those most prominent in the field; and while some of this disagreement centres upon the relatively unimportant (though nonetheless confusing) problems posed by choice of terminology, much of it concerns fundamental issues of theory and procedure. There has been a similar lack of attempts to balance the practical and theoretical sides of the subject: most work has involved either theoretical discussion with little illustration, or detailed analysis with no explicit theoretical perspective. Much work in stylistics is vitiated because of analytical methods whose bases have not been stated clearly enough to allow evaluation and comparative study.

By dividing this book into two parts, we have tried to give due weight to the various tasks which stylistics tries to do. In Part One, after giving a general idea of what stylistics involves, we outline a set of techniques for describing any piece of language, and the various theoretical concepts which are needed to classify the varieties of language into types. We are using English as the language of exemplification, but of course the same techniques and procedures could be used for the stylistic analysis of other languages. In Part Two, we illustrate our approach by describing in detail various extracts of English. We have tried to maintain a balance between spoken and written materials, to present a range of usage running from the most to the least familiar and to concentrate our attention on those varieties

of English which have hitherto been largely or completely ignored. The first extract, the language of conversation, seemed an appropriate choice with which to begin, because it is the variety which is most familiar to most speakers – a familiarity which must, moreover, form an important part, both consciously and unconsciously, of one's ability to identify other, less common varieties. We then move on via spoken commentary, which provides a clear illustration of the wide range of vocal effect available in English, to the language of religion, where both speech and writing have their own distinctive parts to play. The news reporting which follows presents a kind of written language which the majority of people come into regular contact with, and which in some form or other is relatively familiar; and we conclude this, the most detailed, part of our analysis by looking at a form of written language – that of legal documents – which is probably further removed from conversation than any other. This is a selection which was bound to remain to some extent arbitrary, but we hope to have done something towards achieving a balance by committing ourselves to a choice of several other varieties and collecting convenient specimens of them in Chapter 9, where we make suggestions for further study and analysis. Our reasons for excluding the discussion of literary language are presented in Chapter 3. After each chapter, there are exercises designed to raise some of the points which, for reasons of space, could not be dealt with in the main part of our discussion, and to allow lines of investigation which were only briefly mentioned there to be followed up. In both parts, we emphasise the exploratory nature of our approach: we are *investigating* English style, and quite expect that many of our suggestions will have to be modified as more material is examined.

We hope that this book will be particularly useful to students just embarking on college and university studies. We hope too that readers will let us have comments on our method, and suggestions for improvement (particularly of our descriptive terminology, which we are anxious to make as clear as possible); and we should be glad for opinions on the usefulness for study purposes of the transcribed specimens of spoken English – material which is much less easily come by than printed language. We welcome criticisms along these lines, particularly from those who, like ourselves, have the job of encouraging in their students a greater awareness of the wide range of English usage. Work for this book was supported in part by the Research Board of the University of Reading and by a grant from

the Department of Education and Science to the Survey of English Usage. We are also fortunate in having had free access to the files of the Survey, housed in University College London.

We are of course greatly indebted to all those listed in the acknowledgments who have given us permission to reproduce the illustrative material in this book, but it seems appropriate at this point to express our gratitude for being able to use spoken material, most of which has never had a written existence. In particular we should like to thank Mr Arlott, the Reverend I. Gillan, Professor Hough, Mr Mittler, Mr Mishcon and our anonymous conversationalists for personally allowing us to use specimens of their language; Mr Thesiger for arranging permission to quote from Mr Justice Roskill; and the BBC for their many acts of helpfulness, including permission to make use of extracts from broadcasts of the Speech from the Throne, from Mr Baxter's commentary on the funeral of Sir Winston Churchill, and from the news bulletin read by Mr Kingsbury.

Finally, we should like to thank the many people who have provided us with helpful advice and criticism during the long period in which this book was being written. We are particularly grateful to the general editor of this series, Randolph Quirk, for his help at all stages; and also to Frank Palmer, Peter Matthews, and present and past colleagues on the Survey of English Usage at University College London. Needless to say, we have only ourselves to blame for those inadequacies which are still present.

University of Reading DC
University College London DD
June, 1969

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Part One Theoretical Preliminaries

Chapter 1

Introduction

THE NEED FOR STYLISTICS

When we talk about 'a language' – in our case, 'the English language' – we must not be misled into thinking that the label should in some way refer to a readily identifiable object in reality, which we can isolate and examine in a classroom as we might a test-tube mixture, a piece of rock, or a poem. There is no such object. The label 'the English language' is in fact only a shorthand way of referring to something which is not, as the name may seem to imply, a single homogeneous phenomenon at all, but rather a complex of many different 'varieties' of language in use in all kinds of situation in many parts of the world. Naturally, all these varieties have much more in common than differentiates them – they are all clearly varieties of one language, English. But at the same time, each variety is definably distinct from all the others.

One of the clearest examples of this is the difference between spoken English on the one hand, and written English on the other. Another example would be the range of varieties which we would distinguish as regional dialects: a person speaks differently depending on where he is from. No one is likely to confuse the types of English current in New York with those current throughout the London area, for instance; and we readily apply labels of origin to people with accents different from our own – 'Cockney', 'Scouser', 'Geordie', and so on. Again, there are noticeable, though dissimilar, differences between varieties, which are due to the sort of person who is talking or writing and the kind of social situation he is in. To take some examples from spoken English, most people would have little difficulty in recognising whether a dialogue they overheard (without seeing the participants) was taking place between a mother and her baby, between two scientists 'talking shop', or between two businessmen over a telephone. We would also distinguish quite easily a BBC announcer reading the news from a lawyer defending his client in court, and both these from a

clergyman giving a sermon, even if all we had to go by (and this is the important point) was evidence in a tape-recorded extract, with no clues, other than the language used, as to the status and role of the participants.

These are just a few examples of the varieties of English that are used around us: each of us can immediately add many more from his own experience. We may not be able to say precisely what a variety is, what differentiates it from another, what types exist, how many there are or whether they are all as clearly distinguishable as the examples given above; these are things a stylistic theory should tell us. But once the matter is brought to our notice, we are at least aware that there are differences. In the normal process of living, of course, we tend to take these differences completely for granted, recognising and discriminating between the varieties in a largely unconscious way. Only when the differences become so great as to interfere with our understanding, or when someone else's mode of expression is so strange that we remark about it (and, frequently, complain to the daily press in the process!) do we begin to discuss this situation in a more conscious way. But we should recognise that the issues are much larger than these. Each of us, as an educated speaker of English, is, in a sense, multilingual; for in the course of developing our command of language we have encountered a large number of varieties, and, to a certain extent, have learned how to use them. A particular social situation makes us respond with an appropriate variety of language, and, as we move through the day, so the type of language we are using changes fairly instinctively with the situation. We use one variety of English at home, another with our friends, a third at work, and so on. We usually take this ability for granted; but what are the implications of doing this, how far does the ability extend, and how can we begin to study it?

Unfortunately we do not always appreciate sufficiently the potential of language for making communication successful and establishing social togetherness – ends which language may help us to achieve if used well. But if we choose to disregard the rules of language, or fail, through ignorance, to obey them, then language can become instead a barrier to successful communication and integration. This is where the danger lies: it is necessary to replace, by a more controlled, sensitive, and responsible reaction, our hazy awareness of how language should be used in the less familiar situations in which we find ourselves. One test of a successful education is whether it has brought us

to a position whereby we can communicate, on a range of subjects, with people in various walks of life, and gain their understanding as well as understand them. But to be in such a position requires a sharpened consciousness of the form and function of language, its place in society, and its power.

It is not difficult to think of examples where a failure to achieve this desirable fluency is evident. There are many varieties of English which we have not mastered fully, which we have difficulty being at home in – and this involves just as much reacting appropriately to others' use of English as being able to use English ourselves. How often do we speak or write without knowing that what we are doing is causing a bad impression on other people, because of our poor command or inadequate social awareness of our language? There are many occasions when we may unwittingly or carelessly fail to reach social standards of acceptability: obvious examples would be errors like spelling mistakes, breaking the conventions of letter-writing (such as beginning a letter with 'Dear Sir' and ending with 'Yours sincerely') or badly used punctuation; or, at a more sophisticated level, using slang on a relatively formal occasion, making improper use of technical terms in a specialist context, or using language which 'goes over the head' of an audience in making a speech or delivering a lecture. Clearly there are appropriate linguistic 'manners' for the different types of situation in which language is used, which we are expected (and usually want) to show. To remain unaware of the full extent and power of these conventions when entering into one of these situations, and insensitively to carry on using language habits which we find come most easily to us is liable to produce general confusion, and probably criticism and embarrassment as well – a state of affairs which many business firms, and advertising courses in speech-training or word-power improvement are well aware of.

The native speaker of English of course has a great deal of intuitive knowledge about linguistic appropriateness and correctness – when to use one variety of language rather than another – which he has amassed over the years. He will probably have little difficulty in using and responding to the most 'ordinary' uses of language, such as the everyday conversation (described in Chapter 4) which occupies most of our speaking and writing lifetime. Normally, in such a context, mistakes, if they occur, pass by unnoticed or are discounted as unimportant. It is with the relatively infrequently occurring, more specialised uses of language that the average English user may find