

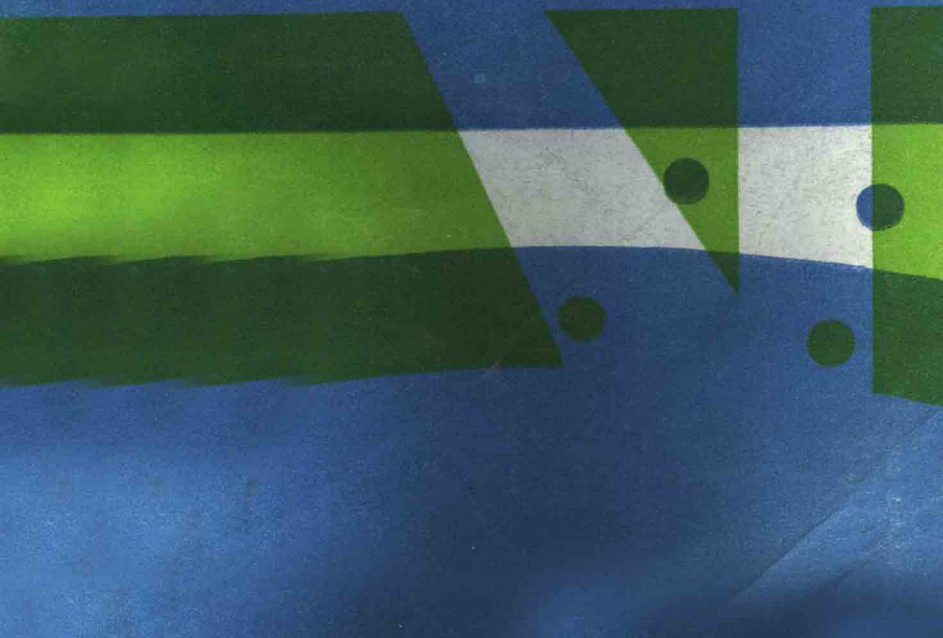
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Style in Fiction

A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose

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Style in fiction

A linguistic introduction to
English fictional prose

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Foreword

Since the first volumes of the English Language Series appeared there has been something like a revolution in the relation between linguistic and literary studies, in part through the mediation of the anthropological 'structuralists'. Numerous critics have turned to the work of professional linguists and equipped themselves with a far sharper knowledge of language. At the same time (and again in part through the same mediating influences), linguists have come to take a far more sophisticated interest in literature. Where the goal was once little more than the assembly of linguistic 'facts' that might be used (if at all) by literary critics, we now find linguists confidently making critical analyses that contribute directly to literary interpretation and evaluation.

In this revolution, Geoffrey Leech has played a leading part – testified, for example, by an earlier volume in this series, *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry*. In the present book, in which he is joined by his colleague Michael Short, a still closer approximation is achieved between the role of linguist and critic. The field – prose fiction – is one in which, as the authors explain in their Introduction, the linguist's contribution has hitherto been relatively slight, because the small-scale structures on which linguistics has in the past most successfully focused are more amenable to discussion in the context of analysing poetry. But in recent years, more and more linguists have extended their scope 'beyond the sentence', and studies of discourse have now become sufficiently developed to give promise of far more insightful linguistic work on extensive prose texts than was conceivable a generation ago.

These convergences of interest have produced a new 'styli-

stics' in which linguist and critic can alike work without their ultimately differing union cards being visible and hence, increasingly, without aridly raising demarcation disputes. *Style in Fiction* is a book of precisely this genre. Though written by men who are undoubtedly (but certainly not solely) linguists, it will be read with equal pleasure by other linguists and by those whose predominant interest lies in the critical study of literature.

In short, the book is a singularly welcome addition to this series. As English has increasingly come into worldwide use, there has arisen a correspondingly increasing need for more information on the language and the ways in which it is used. The English Language Series 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 variety and complexity in speech and writing, and its standards in Britain, the USA, and the other principal areas where the language is used.

University College London
January, 1980

RANDOLPH QUIRK

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University of Lancaster
September, 1979

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Introduction

0.1 AIM

An earlier book in this series (*A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry*)¹ was written with the aim of showing the student of English that examining the language of a literary text can be a means to a fuller understanding and appreciation of the writer's artistic achievement. The present book is written with the same aim in mind, this time taking prose fiction, not poetry, as the object of study.

The book takes its direction from the 'new stylistics' which has applied techniques and concepts of modern linguistics to the study of literature.² This does not mean that we expect our readers to know a great deal about linguistics: we shall aim to interpret the principles and methods of linguistic study in a way that demands relatively little technical knowledge. Readers who are familiar with some basic concepts and traditional terms in grammar, phonetics, and rhetoric will, we hope, find themselves at home in this book, and even readers new to language study should have little difficulty if they follow up occasional explanations and references given in the notes (see especially 3.2). The main thing is that the reader should approach the subject of style with appreciative curiosity, and should take a sympathetic view of our guiding maxim, which is that to make progress in understanding style one has to make use of an explicit understanding of language – not just language in a literary context.

This means that we propose, not to dissect the flower of beauty (for that is a misleading metaphor), but at least to scrutinize it carefully, even, from time to time, under a microscope. For those who are reluctant to do this, we can do no better than

to quote the eminent linguist-critic Leo Spitzer:

I would maintain that to formulate observation by means of words is not to cause the artistic beauty to evaporate in vain intellectualities; rather, it makes for a widening and deepening of the aesthetic taste. It is only a frivolous love that cannot survive intellectual definition; great love prospers with understanding.³

Spitzer's insistence that the smallest detail of language can unlock the 'soul' of a literary work is an extreme expression of the philosophy to which we subscribe: by making ourselves explain *how* a particular effect or meaning is achieved we understand better not just how it is achieved (which in itself is essential to the critical task of explanation) but also gain a greater appreciation of what the writer has created.

0.2 LANGUAGE IN PROSE AND POETRY

The student of literature is, perhaps, more likely to accept the usefulness of linguistic analysis in the study of poetry than prose. The poet, more obviously than the prose writer, does 'interesting things' with language. And if one wanted to find a definition of poetry that went deeper than the run-of-the-mill dictionary definition, it might be that whereas in poetry, aesthetic effect cannot be separated from the creative manipulation of the linguistic code, in prose, it tends to reside more in other factors (such as character, theme, argument) which are expressed through, rather than inherent in, language. Yet the great novelists of the English language have been, arguably without exception, also great artists in the use of words, and the challenge remains of trying to explain the nature of that artistry, and how it integrates with the larger artistic achievement of the writer.

The twelve-year gap which separates this volume from its companion volume on poetry is perhaps symbolic of the more problematic nature of the task. The challenge is greater because the effects of prose style, and their sources in the language, are often more unobtrusive than those of poetic language. While a condensed poetic metaphor, or a metrical pattern will jump to

the attention as something which distinguishes the language of poetry from everyday language, the distinguishing features of a prose style tend to become detectable over longer stretches of text, and to be demonstrable ultimately only in quantitative terms. And the sheer bulk of prose writing is intimidating; linguistic techniques are more readily adapted to the miniature exegesis of a lyric poem, than to the examination of a full-scale novel. In prose, the problem of how to select – what sample passages, what features to study – is more acute, and the incompleteness of even the most detailed analysis more apparent.

Because of these difficulties of scale and concentration, it is understandable that the study of prose style has tended to suffer from 'bittiness'. A writer's style has all too frequently been reduced to one feature, or a handful of features. Some aspects of style, such as methods of speech presentation (see Ch 10), have been recognized as 'interesting', and have been intensively studied, whereas others have been neglected. And where the data are so vast and varied, there is the inevitable temptation to retreat into vague generalization. Although the 'new stylistics' has brought illuminating studies of this or that stylistic feature of this or that work or writer, no adequate theory of prose style has emerged.

Again, no one seems to have provided a satisfactory and reliable methodology for prose style analysis. Even Spitzer confided to his readers:

How often, with all the theoretical experience of method accumulated in me over the years, have I stared blankly, quite similar to one of my beginning students, at a page that would not yield its magic. The only way out of this state of unproductivity is to read and reread.⁴

The critic Ian Watt began his notable explication of Henry James's style in the first paragraph of *The Ambassadors* with a similar confession that he was 'virtually helpless ... as far as any fully developed and acceptable technique of explicating prose is concerned'.⁵ Yet another writer on prose style, Edward Corbett,⁶ recommended the laborious practice of copying out the whole text, as a preliminary to style analysis – a means of focusing the mind which is not to be underrated, but would have been less practical had Corbett chosen *Clarissa* rather than

A Modest Proposal for his text! Coming to terms with prose style has seemed a hit-and-miss matter even to its more successful practitioners.

0.3 WHERE LINGUISTICS COMES IN

These cautionary remarks will, we hope, gently deter readers from expecting too much from this book. We shall try to give the breadth of coverage which previous studies have lacked, and this means putting forward, in informal terms, an overall 'theory' or 'model' of prose style (see especially 1.6-7, 4.5-7). We shall also propose a general informal classification of features of style as a tool of analysis which can be applied to any text (see 3.1). But these are attempts to give shape and system to a field of study in which much remains unclear, and hidden beneath the threshold of observation. As we argue in Chapter 2, stylistics, as the study of the relation between linguistic form and literary function, cannot be reduced to mechanical objectivity. In both the literary and the linguistic spheres much rests on the intuition and personal judgment of the reader, for which a system, however good, is an aid rather than a substitute. There will always remain, as Dylan Thomas says, 'the mystery of having been moved by words'.

But let us now turn to a more positive viewpoint. In the twenty or more years since Spitzer and Watt wrote the articles already cited, there have been important developments in the linguistic study of prose style. Just as important, linguistics itself has developed from a discipline with narrowly defined formal concerns to a more comprehensive, if more inchoate discipline, in which the role of language in relation to the conceptualization and communication of meaning has been fruitfully investigated. There have been new ways of looking at language in psychological, sociological, and philosophical terms, and their application to literature has been tentatively explored. The time seems right, then, for a book which aims to synthesize such viewpoints in the practical study of literary language.

We speak of 'viewpoints' in the plural, because there is no single body of theory to which one can appeal in applying the

results of linguistic research. The model of Transformational Grammar (see 1.3.2), which dominated linguistic thinking fifteen years ago, sees language primarily as a capability of the human mind, and therefore highlights the formal and cognitive aspects of language. But Transformational Grammar has been challenged by various other models, particularly those which emphasize the social role of language. Halliday's functional model (see 1.5) for example sees language as a 'social semiotic', and so directs attention particularly to the communicative and socially expressive functions of language. The same shift of focus has resulted, in a different way, from the influence on linguistics of work by 'ordinary language' philosophers such as Searle (on speech acts, see 9.1.1) and Grice (on conversational implicature, see 9.1.2). Yet another set of linguistic traditions, which we may assemble under the name of 'European structuralism', sees the same structural principles of contrast and pattern as underlying varied forms of human activity, and so as equally manifested in language, art, and other cultural forms.

If there is a single characteristic which unites these diverse enterprises in linguistics today, it is a tendency to explore for pattern and system below the surface forms of language; to search for the principles of meaning and language use which activate and control the code. In this, the linguist's concerns have moved in directions which are likely to bring them closer to those of the critic. If a text is regarded in objective simplicity as a sequence of symbols on paper, then the modern linguist's scrutiny is not just a matter of looking *at* the text, but of looking *through* the text to its significance.

This is why it would be wrong to expect linguistics to provide an objective, mechanical technique of stylistic analysis. One major concern of stylistics is to check or validate intuitions by detailed analysis, but stylistics is also a dialogue between literary reader and linguistic observer, in which insight, not mere objectivity, is the goal. Linguistic analysis does not replace the reader's intuition, what Spitzer calls the 'click' in the mind; but it may prompt, direct, and shape it into an understanding.

Linguistics places literary uses of language against the background of more 'ordinary' uses of language, so that we see the poet or novelist making use of the same code, the same set of communicative resources, as the journalist, the scientist, or the