Literature and Language Teaching

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Preface

Although this book is called *Literature and Language Teaching*, it does not pretend to offer a comprehensive or synoptic account of the relationship between the two elements, literature and language teaching. We have selected contributors who provide reasonable and well-argued cases which, though they represent different viewpoints, are united by a recognition of the varied ways in which language and literature study are related and can be integrated. Literature is not regularly discussed as a coherent branch of the curriculum in relation to language development in either mother-tongue or foreign-language teaching. However, classroom development cannot proceed before key theoretical and practical issues are identified and debated. We hope that this collection, though not exhaustive, may lay a basis for this further exploration and debate.

C. J. Brumfit
R. A. Carter

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Introduction

This is a book about the interaction between language, literature, and education. It consists of four parts: this Introduction, in which a number of fundamental issues are discussed in some detail; a section of papers on linguistics, literature, and the implications of the interaction between linguistics and literature for education; a section of papers on general educational issues raised by wanting to include literature in the curriculum; and a final section which looks at one very important issue with specific reference to one overseas setting and to British education.

The book includes papers of varied levels of abstraction, in order to explore both general principles and specific problems of implementation. Similarly, the papers in Part Two may be more immediately accessible to the general reader than some of those in Part One. None the less, we feel that the book can be read as a consecutive set of papers, for there is a progression in the argument from general principles, to consideration of the role of language in literature, to implications of that for educational and curricular discussion. At the same time, we would be unwilling to make excessive claims for the discussion here. Literature teaching is by no means secure in many educational systems, and its role as an ally of language is not infrequently disputed. This collection can only open up further discussion in an area which is increasingly important.

English Literature and English Language

This part of the Introduction consists of four sections in which some seminal issues in the study of literature and language are addressed. These issues are: the relations between *stylistics* and literature study (Section 1), questions of what is understood by *literary language* and literature as a particular type of *discourse* (Sections 2 and 3), and the issue of the kinds of *literary competence* involved in reading texts (Section 4). The book as a whole is intended to offer a selective introduction to issues which will require careful thought to enable further progress in this important area to be made. The issue of 'literature and language teaching' is generating a great deal of interest at present, but we wish to avoid being either programmatic or synoptic—although we do hope to argue clear cases for particular emphases and directions. Our examination in this introduction to the book will be largely theoretical and necessarily selective but, wherever possible, we will focus on issues which we and our contributors judge to be relevant for methodology and pedagogy in the domains of language and literature teaching. In both its parts, this Introduction should provide a framework within which the papers that comprise the volume can be understood, interrelated, and evaluated.

1 Literary stylistics and the study of literature

The main starting point in this section is the relationship between *practical criticism* and *stylistic analysis* of literary text. It is assumed here that most teachers of English will be acquainted with or will have had direct experience of practical criticism in relation to the interpretation of literary works. (For a clear introduction to the aims of practical criticism, its development, and a number of examples in practice on modern English poems, see Cox and Dyson 1963.) Practical criticism shares two main presuppositions with the discipline of stylistics: first, that literary text is made from language and its primary focus for analysis will be the patterns made by language. In a basic sense, this is the only 'material' the analyst has to go on. The literary text is seen as self-sufficient as a language

artefact, and, as it were, as an object in itself. The second presupposition is that practical criticism, or 'close reading', is opposed to belletristic or aestheticist waffle about literary texts, and attempts to locate intuitive responses to the meanings and effects released by the text in the structure of the language used. In this respect, the critic will attempt to show *how* what is said is said and *how* meanings are made. Any interpretation which does not give due attentiveness to the base of language organization is not, it is claimed, worth very much, though a main difference between stylistics and practical criticism is in the *degree* of detailed systematic attention given to the analysis of language.

Intuitive responses to a text are central to the process of reading and re-reading literature. They are a necessary starting point for fuller investigation of what a text means to us. However, it is not altogether clear what exactly is primary in our response to a text. Is it an experience evoked in us exclusively by what is referred to in the text? Does it result from a relationship between a particular text and material we have read previously on related themes or in a special 'cultural' tradition? Or is the initial response a linguistic matter of reactions to striking phrases or to an unusually evocative stretch of language? Or is it some combination of these separate reactions? Crucially for non-native speakers, how much of the text do we have to understand linguistically before reading gives rise to productive responses and intuitions? It is important to keep an open mind about these under-investigated issues.

Not uncommonly, constant exposure and re-reading is felt to deliver to students the necessary intuitive awareness. A problem here, and one often noted by stylisticians, is that exposure may serve only the most able and linguistically proficient students. Advocates of stylistics (including most of the contributors to Part One of this book) consider that stylistic–analytical procedures provide a principled method by which reading and interpretative skills can be developed, and recognize that some students have to learn how to analyse language before they can respond subjectively to a text. In any case, it is argued, the continuing processes of systematically formalizing intuitions can lead to ever-increasing appreciation of a writer's artistry in and through language. It is not clear, however, what precise form language analysis should take, and much depends on the aims of the course, the level of language competence, whether the literary text is studied in a language class or a literature class and so on. For this reason, some papers in Part One of the book advocate *language-based approaches* prior to

linguistic–stylistic analysis. These can involve the application of tried and tested language teaching techniques (*e.g.* types of questioning strategy, small group and pair activities, paraphrase, cloze work, etc.) to literary text study. Papers by Long, Carter, and Nash illustrate such procedures and discuss some of the problems involved. In fact the *familiarity* of such procedures to students of English as a foreign language is not normally a difficulty. The second part of our Introduction, 'Literature and Education', discusses further questions of primacy, interdependence of language and response, and the issue of whether competence can be 'caught' or 'taught' in literature teaching.

There is insufficient space in this introduction for detailed illustration of stylistic analysis, but readers will find examples in Part One of the book which draw on systematic linguistic analysis of syntax, lexis, discourse, phonology, etc., to support interpretations or discussions of a literary text. (For further examples with a pedagogic orientation see papers in Carter 1982a and Brumfit 1983 and a review by Carter, 1985.) We support the view that a sensitive stylistic analysis of a text can produce facts about its linguistic organization which cannot be ignored. More importantly for the student a firm basis in language analysis is given from which he or she can proceed to say with some precision what it means to them, how it means what it means, and why the text is liked or disliked by them as a piece of literature. Analytical tools are supplied, or, as is often the case with foreign students, where explicit discussion of language is already a familiar feature of the classroom, existing analytical tools can be used to extend individual interpretative skills. The case for linguistic–stylistic analysis has been well put by Roger Pearce (1977):

> Linguistic analysis becomes an integral aspect of the process of understanding literature, a means of formulating intuition, a means of objectifying it and rendering it susceptible to investigation and, in so doing, a means of feeling out and revising our initial interpretation.

Such study is clearly not a case of remembering what the teacher said about a poem, or what interpretation was given in the books of criticism in the library.

We believe that students and teachers of literature should engage in stylistic analysis when studying literature, and that this can ensue with varying degrees of systematicity at different levels of literary study. But we also acknowledge that there are limitations to this

procedure. Sometimes these result directly from teachers' attitudes to stylistics. For example, some teachers consider it to be mechanical and destructive both of responsive enjoyment and imaginative participation in literature, and they complain that too exaggerated a claim has been made on behalf of stylistics. (For a representative and provocative argument, see Roger Gower's review of *Poetry and the System* by Brian Lee, in *ELT Journal* Volume 38 No. 1, 1984.) We agree that stylistic analysis cannot be the only approach to literature study, and that there are dangers in analysis which is independent of responses to a text or for which, where appropriate, students have not been prepared by selected preliminary or 'pre-literary' language-based activities (see especially the paper in this volume by Carter). In the second part of this Introduction, readers are referred to material in this book and elsewhere in which arguments are provided for studying literature as translinguistic discourse—that is, as a discourse involving more than mere systems of language (see especially the paper by Burke and Brumfit)—and where the admission of a wider social, historical, and political 'context' is seen as essential to the teaching of literature. To this extent the question of depth v. breadth raised by Pickett and others in this volume is engaged. Thus, we acknowledge that there are potential limitations in focusing analytically on language, but we believe that the following statement, made by Roman Jakobson in 1960, is just as relevant today to literature and language teaching debates:

> A linguist deaf to the poetic function of language and a literary scholar indifferent to linguistic problems and unconversant with linguistic methods are equally flagrant anachronisms. (Jakobson 1960: 377).

2 What is literary language?

Increasingly, linguists and linguistic critics are addressing themselves to questions such as: is there a language of literature? And what *is* literary language? Anyone interested in the study of literature would have to admit that these are important and fundamental questions. Indeed, some may argue that investigating such aspects of literature is more important and fundamental than writing yet another interpretation of Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' or a Shakespeare sonnet. It is the kind of investigation which often

serves to generate further questions, but one which many teachers believe can help students to explore in an open-minded way the *nature* of literary text. (For fuller argument see Widdowson 1975: Chapter 6, as well as section 4 of this Introduction.)

Our focus in this section is on questions which are specifically concerned with language. We begin, however, with an assertion. *We believe that there is no such thing as literary language.* When we say this, we mean that we find it impossible to isolate any single or special property of language which is exclusive to a literary work. It does not mean we deny that language is *used* in ways which can be distinguished as literary.

For example, it has been conventionally thought, from Romantic critics such as Coleridge onwards, that metaphor is the distinguishing mark of literature. In fact, it requires only a little linguistic introspection to see that metaphor is pervasive in our daily discourse and, as a property of language, is not in any way unique. Metaphors are not found only in Shakespeare or Donne.

The world of discussion and debate, parliamentary, journalistic, academic or otherwise, is impregnated with metaphors which regularly compare argument to the conduct of a battle. The following are just a few instances of an abundance of military metaphors: ***marshal an argument***; ***have*** or ***defend a position***; ***buttress an argument/position***; ***concede a point***; ***conflict of opinion***; ***his strategy in the debate was to . . .***; ***she manoeuvred her points skilfully***; ***to be entrenched***, etc. One parliamentary reporter wrote recently that 'the argument of the leader of the opposition was quickly so badly wounded by the prime minister that for the rest of the debate crutches were needed and he ended up looking a very old soldier'. (A fuller argument and range of examples can be found in Lakoff and Johnson 1980.)

It is also regularly noted, particularly in respect of poetry, that a striking phonological pattern is a distinguishing mark of poetic language. Yet there are several instances in 'ordinary language' where patterns of contrast, similarity, or parallelism are to be found. Proverbs, for example: 'a stitch in time saves nine'; 'where there's a will there's a way'. Or children's songs and games: 'London Bridge is *falling down, falling down, falling down*'; 'Incy-wincy spider . . .'. Or in advertisements: 'Drink*a* pint*a* milk*a* day'; 'You'll never *b*ite a *b*etter *b*it of *b*utter in your life'. (See also the essay by Nash in this volume for further discussion and examples.) It is also worth noting here that advertising copy can also play with

density of social–cultural allusion in ways which, it is often claimed, can only be the province of poetry. The subtlety of this reference to a Great Train Robber and the pun on 'nips in and out' (Biggs regularly escaped from British prisons) makes for a striking and memorable advertisement for a British Leyland Mini car:

Nips in and out like Ronald Biggs.

However, this last example points to a possibly more substantial claim that semantic density of language is more properly associated with literature. We would not necessarily disagree with such a claim, but would point out that playing with the double-sidedness or even multiple valency of certain word combinations is regularly to be found in jokes, for example:

Q. How do you make a Swiss roll?
A. Push him down a mountain.

or

Q. What's black and white and red all over?
A. A newspaper.

(where the structural ambiguity i.e. *roll* [verb and noun] and *red* [adjective and verb (read)] is exploited). Or in advertisements such as:

You can't beat the experience (of PAN AM flights)

(where the lexical value of 'experience' as something which you have and something which you can undergo is utilized). And:

You can't see through a Guinness

(where the ambiguity of 'see through' because it is not transparent—Guinness is a dark, opaque beer—and because it is a good honest beer—you 'see through' things which are deceptive—is very subtly played upon).

In case it is thought that we are saying that all language is literary and that all language users are as creative and imaginative as each other, we are *not*. Clearly when Ted Hughes in his poem 'Wind' describes the wind blowing across hills in the following metaphorical terms:

The tent of the hills drummed and strained its guyrope

or Auden—describing a train's progress—deploys phonological

pattern in his poem 'Night Mail':

> Written on paper of every hue
> The pink, the violet, the white and the blue
> The chatty, the catty, the boring, adoring,
> The cold and official and the heart outpouring.
> Clever, stupid, short and long
> The typed and the printed and the spelt all wrong

there are a number of linguistic features which can be isolated (rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, metaphor, etc.) and which are combined in such a way as to reinforce the message conveyed and to link with other linguistic devices *across the whole text* so that a unity and consistency of effect is produced. Such 'layering' of linguistic features is not so pervasive in the so-called 'non-literary' examples we have examined.

Above all, however, it is important to recognize that questions of value, judgements of relative merit, effectiveness or classic status do not fall directly within the remit of linguistics. Linguists may, indeed should, face such questions, but they must take off some linguistic hats if they want to provide an answer.

In other words it is stressed again that there is no such thing as literary language which can be recognized and isolated in the same way as, for example, the language of newspaper headlines, or legal language, or the language variety of weather forecasting. That is, with the exception of what are loosely identified as poeticisms (e.g. 'eftsoons', 'steed', 'verdure', 'azure') there is no specialist lexis to the extent that 'trough', 'anti-cyclone', 'low pressure', 'isobars' belong unmistakably to the register or language variety of weather forecasting. Neither are there unique syntactic patterns such as:

> Lord's son weds kitchen maid
> Polls freeze out frosty Foot

(articleless substantives, simple present tense) common to newspaper headlines, or:

> The vendor undertakes to exercise no further claim on the aforementioned property

which is restricted to the context of legal contracts and the like.

Literature is not a language variety. This can be demonstrated by pointing out that literary text is almost the only 'context' where different varieties of language can be mixed and still admitted. Any deviation from norms of lexis and syntax in legal documents would

be inadmissible, but in these lines from a poem by W. H. Auden different levels of formality, mutually exclusive lexis, and variable syntax (varieties of journalism, military discourse, slang, archaism, etc.) co-exist because Auden judges such heterogeneity as appropriate to his purpose:

Kicking his mother until she let go of his soul
Has given him a healthy appetite; clearly, her role
  In the New Order must be
To supply and deliver his raw materials free;
  Should there be any shortage,
She will be held responsible; she also promises
To show him all such attentions as befit his age.

  Having dictated peace,
With one fist clenched behind his head, heel drawn up to thigh
The cocky little ogre dozes off, ready,
  Though, to take on the rest
Of the world at the drop of a hat or the mildest
  Nudge of the impossible,
Resolved, cost what it may, to seize supreme power and
Sworn to resist tyranny to the death with all
  Forces at his command.

(W. H. Auden, 'Mundus et Infans')

Similar features are to be observed in the poem by Robert Graves, 'The Persian Version', discussed in the chapter by Graham Trengove in this volume. Another notable example is the 'Nausicaa' section of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, in which the language commonly associated with sentimental pulp fiction is employed, or the 'Proteus' section in which, sometimes within the same clause, different historical varieties co-exist in order to embody, it might be said, the gradual gestation of an embryo—simultaneously of a child and the modern English language—and in order to serve to remind us that any non-literary linguistic form can be pressed into literary service. Writers will exclude no language from a literary function.

To conclude this section, it is necessary to establish two central points.

1 Linguistics *as a descriptive science* can reveal some interesting aspects of language use in what are 'conventionally' literary or non-literary contexts. Such linguistic analysis should assist students of literature to consider in a rational way some of the questions raised, and to re-examine their own presuppositions about literary