

CULTURAL

Change in English

CLIMATE

Fictional Prose

AND

from the late Victorian

LINGUISTIC

to the early

STYLE

Modern Period

GILLIAN CAWTHRA

Cultural Climate and Linguistic Style

**Change in English Fictional Prose from
the Late Victorian to the Early Modern
Period**

Gillian Cawthra

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CULTURAL CLIMATE AND LINGUISTIC STYLE

For Barry

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G. C.

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1

Introduction

'Late Victorian' and 'Early Modern' are descriptive titles which are often used to refer to the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries respectively. This use of different names suggests that many people feel that there was a change in sensibility at that time. There is a tacit assumption that Pater, Meredith, and Gissing are all novelists whose work shares common features with other 'Late Victorian' writers. Equally, Lawrence, Conrad, and Joyce are generally felt to be harbingers of a new kind of fiction, and thus to be representative of the 'Early Modern' period. However, the distinction acknowledged between the two periods is taken for granted rather than closely defined. Little attempt is made to establish the exact differences between these two groups of authors and the historical periods in which they lived and wrote, or to demonstrate that they are as far apart in style and outlook as is usually supposed. The main aim of this book is to examine some novels written during the transition from the one period to the other, to see whether such an agreement – that there was change and that the end of the nineteenth century is different from the beginning of the twentieth century – can be justified with reference to developments in fictional prose.

There are several ways of examining aspects of fictional prose writing. Literary criticism, for example, concentrates on the thematic aspects of a novel, while a Marxist approach relates it to its social and historical background. This book explores the novel through its language. Each writer constructs his sentences in a different way, and the analysis of these differences of usage might enable us to point to linguistic features typical of one author or period rather than of any other. Hence the approach to the novel adopted here is complementary to existing work: to the study of theme, characterisation, and background, is added the study of language.

The book concentrates on the linguistic analysis of literary texts for two reasons. The first is that, although many people have written on English fictional prose at the turn of this century,

research has tended to concentrate on only one author at a time and little contrastive study has been made. For example, we know much about Meredith's novels through Gillian Beer's excellent study, and much about Conrad through, among others, Jocelyn Baines, but no study has compared the two novelists' work. This means that it has not been possible to directly compare the Late Victorian with the Early Modern period. By taking excerpts from six different authors and novels in this book, such a direct comparison is made possible, and fresh light is shed upon the work of each individual writer as well as upon the time in which he wrote. New insights are made through the juxtaposition of authors and works not commonly associated with each other.

The second reason is that earlier work in this area has largely ignored the study of the language of these turn-of-the-century authors in favour of the study of themes, characterisation, and the literary concerns of the novel. For example, Macmillan's Casebook series assembled the criticism of particular novels and authors in one volume; Roger Ebbatson studied the Nature Tradition as a theme in English fiction at this time; and Richard Swigg related Lawrence and Hardy to American literature. These examples could be greatly multiplied. However, this concentration on the literary aspects of the novel means that its most important aspect, its language (*sine qua non*), is still not fully explored. By carefully analysing the excerpts from the six different authors and novels in this book, an attempt is made towards fully understanding their language. The addition of a more systematic understanding of a text's language to the knowledge already acquired of its literary dimensions results in a fuller appreciation of the work and its place in our cultural history.

Hence this book tries to enlarge our knowledge of the Late Victorian and Early Modern periods through the analysis and comparison of the linguistic features of some of the novels written at the time. It also serves as an introduction to stylistics, or the study of the language of literature. It uses systemic linguistics (a method of analysis developed from traditional grammar) to examine the language of these novels. It explains this methodology and its advantages for stylistics, and shows how it can be applied to the study of literary language.

Before going on to introduce systemic linguistics a general outline of some of the other approaches to style study may help to set the work undertaken in this book in perspective.

BACKGROUND

People have always been interested in language and in the ability of literature to communicate ideas and evoke emotions. New impetus was given to the study of language by the publication of Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* in 1957. This book, and the concomitant growth of the new discipline of linguistics, gave new life to that interest, and suggested new ways of studying literary language. There is no need here to give an exhaustive history of linguistics and stylistics in the last thirty years, but some general outlines of the kinds of approaches adopted will give sufficient indication of some of their underlying concerns. We shall look first at examples of approaches which study literary language on a large scale, across texts and genres; then at examples of approaches which study literary language on a small scale, within one author or text. Many other, different, examples could have been chosen: these are simply representative of the whole.

For example, in the former category, two approaches to the language of literature concentrate not so much on the style of an individual author, but on what is common to a range of texts within the same genre or which have the same function. Both rely on the concept of 'register', a term borrowed from sociolinguistics.

Sociolinguistics, or the study of spoken language in its social contexts, recognises different types of linguistic variation. Each is further divisible, but the four main varieties are as follows. The first is regional variation, in which differences of linguistic usage roughly correlate with different areas on a map. Thus we refer broadly to a Yorkshire dialect, and understand both identifiable speech patterns and their association with a geographical location. The second is social variation, or social dialect, in which the linguistic usage correlates with the social class that the speaker either actually belongs to or that he or she would like to be thought to belong to. A literary example of this is Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, in which Eliza is taken for a lady once her accent and dress successfully mimic those of the upper classes. Register is the third type of linguistic variation, in which the type of language used by a speaker correlates with a given social situation. Thus the same person talks quite differently to a friend, a doctor, or a policeman. Finally, the fourth variation is that of idiolect, or the language of the individual. No two people speak exactly alike, and we can recognise someone by the way in which they talk.

Of these four categories, the last two are most applicable to literary language. There are examples of regional variation (William Barnes in Dorset, Hugh MacDiarmid in Scotland), and of social variation (particularly in the Socialist novels of the 1930s), but they are unusual when found in complete texts, rather than as aids to character delineation. Idiolect in speech is analogous to style in literature, and we need to be able to isolate the features that make a person's spoken or written language unique. The concept of register has yielded some of the most useful ideas.

It has been applied most successfully in the classification of literature. Aristotle had differentiated between a 'high style', which was appropriate for tragedy and the gods, and a 'low style', which was associated with bawdy comedy and mortals. This distinction worked as long as literary genres remained discrete, but when the borders between one genre and another became blurred, as they did over the next two thousand years, it was no longer possible to maintain a rigid distinction between high style and low. Thus, to generalise, in Greek drama Euripides and Sophocles wrote plays in a high style and Aristophanes wrote in a low; in Shakespeare both high and low style are found within the same play, but there is a perceptible break between them (the blank verse of the court alternates with the bawdy prose of Falstaff and his companions); and in Dickens the comic and tragic are intermingled without an easily recognisable shift in style.

This increasing complexity of literature led to different categorisations. Following sociolinguistics, further subdivisions of the concept of register were proposed. For example, temporal register correlated a text with a given period of time: thus we recognise the Authorised Version of the Bible as belonging to the turn of the seventeenth century. Genre correlated a text with a particular type of literature: a play, or a lyric, or a novel. In these cases and others, our awareness of the appropriate classification is usually the result of literary and cultural training rather than of an ability to exactly define the features which so classify them. We can usually tell when a text conforms to our expectations of its medium or situation (when a church sermon sounds like a church sermon) and when it does not (when the priest stands up in the pulpit and starts swearing), without being able to offer more than vague suggestions as to how we know.

Written language has been classified on much the same lines. Five categories have been postulated, ranging from very formal to

very informal. The most formal is 'frozen', that is, language that is archaic or so convoluted as to be extremely difficult to speak, for example, legal language. The next category is 'formal', which is less archaic but still written rather than spoken, for example, an academic monograph. The third is 'consultative', which is written but could be spoken, for example, a business letter, or manufacturers' instructions. The fourth is 'casual', which can be written but is happier spoken, for example, letters between friends. The last is 'intimate', which is as uneasy in written language as 'frozen' is in spoken language. These categories are all found in literature and an understanding of the register within which a text is working is crucial to our full understanding of it. The register adopted establishes the norm for that text, and tensions are produced when that norm is violated. Much of the aggression evident in Harold Pinter's plays, for example, results from the clash between the expectations created by the linguistic register of one character being constantly contradicted or thwarted by the different expectations created by the linguistic register of another character. The whole subject of register in spoken and written discourse is one of the most fascinating and exciting areas of current stylistic research.

In 1970, Roland Barthes demolished this proliferation of literary categories. *S/Z* restored a binary division of literature, but whereas Aristotles' dichotomy had been between high style and low, Barthes' was between what he called '*lisible*', or 'readerly', and '*scriptible*', or 'writerly'. He suggested that there were two types of literature. The first, the '*lisible*', renders the reader idle or redundant. We submit to the text, which virtually 'reads itself'. Literature of this kind reinforces an established view of reality and social values. It is static rather than dynamic, and Barthes includes in this category the accepted classics of literature, for example, Racine. The second category, the '*scriptible*', by contrast, gives the reader an active role in the creation of the work. It invites us to accept our function as partner in literary exuberance, and through co-operation to recognise the relationship between writing and reading. Literature of this kind upsets preconceived ideas and stereotyped reactions, and ultimately makes us examine the nature of the world and of language itself. Examples of this category are Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Joyce's *Ulysses*.

S/Z is concerned not only with this bipartite classification of literature, but also with the way in which a story is put together.

Barthes takes a short story by Balzac, called 'Sarrasine', and subjects it to the most rigorous analysis. Part of his examination of the work rests on an understanding of register – what expectations does the language create and are they fulfilled? – and part on an understanding of narrative structure *per se*.

The study of narrative structure rests primarily on the research carried out by the Russian Formalists in the 1920s. Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* was published in a French translation in 1970, and thus this line of work began to reach a wider audience. One of the distinguishing features of Formalism was its interest in the text as a whole, and its concern with the 'how?' of a story rather than the 'what?'. In examining narrative structure, Propp collected many Russian folktales, and reduced them all to their bare essentials. He found that underneath the individual elaborations, only a few skeleton stories remained. For example, a Hero is a younger brother who is forced to leave home on an impossible Quest; he meets an Enemy, and a Helper; and he finally succeeds in his Trial, to be rewarded with the hand of the Princess.

These basic patterns were also discovered in much literature as well as in folktales from other countries, and various universal structural markers were observed. Thus, it was suggested, the 'story' is the whole formed by the action and by the characters. Within the story are three main 'functions'. 'Kernels' are branching points in the story, when choices between alternative courses of behaviour are made. (For example, in some of Enid Blyton's stories, the children see some sweets left lying around and choose either to be good and not take them, or to be naughty and steal.) 'Catalysts' elaborate a path of behaviour chosen in a kernel. (Thus, Miss Blyton tells us what dire events befall the naughty children before they own up and restore the sweets to their rightful owner.) 'Indices' refer to character or atmosphere rather than directly to events. (Thus, if one of the children has a bag it is a catalyst if it is used to hide the stolen sweets in, and an index if it is just part of the general description of the child.) These terms are not exhaustive, and are sometimes called different things by different scholars. The point is simply that it is possible and rewarding to look at a whole text or group of stories to see how they are constructed.

The results obtained are sometimes very useful in stylistic studies, because the proportions between kernels, catalysts, and indices in a text are often distinctive to a particular writer. In Agatha Christie, for example, one may be reasonably sure that it

is the outsider in the story who has committed the murder, however unlikely that may appear at the outset. Similarly, the stories written for Mills and Boon have such a predictable narrative structure that attempts have been made to programme computers to write them.

The approaches to style study that we have looked at so far have all been concerned with the macrocosm of linguistic expression. The concept of register, the classification of literature, and narrative structure, all deal with the organisation of language on a large scale. The approaches we shall look at for the rest of this section are all more interested in smaller units of utterance within a single author's *oeuvre* or within a single text. Our examples of the research carried out in these more restricted areas are taken from transformational grammar, cohesion, and lexis.

Transformational grammar was developed by Chomsky and others during the late 1950s and early 1960s. It is a rather complicated method of describing language using postulated 'kernel' or basic sentences, which are then 'transformed' into an actual utterance. Its first important application to the language of literature was in the work of Richard Ohmann, whose 'Generative Grammars and the Concept of Literary Style' was published in 1964. Ohmann used transformational grammar to analyse the styles of Faulkner, Hemingway, James, and D. H. Lawrence. He reconstructed what he thought were the kernel sentences in the texts, and then listed and counted the transformations between each kernel sentence and the actual textual surface. This method of analysing a literary text yielded the following observations. First, that the three transformations concerned with relativisation, conjunction, and comparison, underlay the complexity of Faulkner's style. Second, that Hemingway's transformations generally turned the kernel sentences into free indirect speech. Third, that Henry James's style, with its plethora of embedded elements, was dependent upon the positioning of structures rather than upon their content. And fourth, that D. H. Lawrence's style was the result of constant deletion.

These conclusions gave specific linguistic evidence that confirmed the intuitions of literary critics. Ohmann offered no major surprises in his article, but he did offer the proof that enabled scholars to say, 'this author's style is recognisable by that habit of linguistic usage'. However, the writers chosen by Ohmann are all obviously idiosyncratic, and it is arguable whether transformational

grammar could derive such exact insights into the practices of more stylistically neutral authors. Furthermore, transformational grammar is notoriously difficult to use. The presentation of its results is often hard to read. Thus, whatever its undoubted merits in some areas of language study, it is not ideal as a methodology for literary students of literary language. Other grammars have, however, proved more successful in stylistic studies. Traditional grammar, for example, has enabled some useful and interesting results to be obtained, particularly when units smaller than the sentence, or else working across and between sentences, have been examined. Two instances of this are cohesion and lexis.

Interest in cohesion, both for itself, and as a marker of style, is the most recent development in stylistics to be commented on in this section. Cohesion refers to the devices by which sentence is linked to sentence and paragraph to paragraph in order to make a text a coherent whole. For example, 'anaphora' is the device which reminds us of what has already been stated in a text. Thus, at the beginning of a paragraph, 'The approaches to style study that we have looked at so far . . .' reminds us of what we have already learned in the chapter. At the beginning of a sentence, 'Thus, . . .' refers back to the previous point or points made. 'Cataphora', on the other hand, is the device which prepares us for what is to come. Thus, at the end of a paragraph, 'Our examples of the research carried out in these more restricted areas are taken from transformational grammar, cohesion, and lexis' tells us that the next subjects to be dealt with will be transformational grammar, cohesion, and lexis. At the end of a sentence, 'This method of analysing a literary text yielded the following observations' prepares us for a list of the results obtained. Cohesion in a text is rather like narrative structure in a story. Both are the mechanical devices by which the text or story moves smoothly from one point to another to create a satisfying whole. Both study the often unnoticed details of linguistic construction. In stylistics, cohesion is helpful in identifying particular authors because no two people construct their texts in exactly the same way. One writer may generally prefer to use 'thus' rather than 'therefore', for example. Another may like to balance a point of view presented in one sentence or paragraph with an opposing point of view presented in the next sentence or paragraph. The difficulty in using cohesion as a marker of style, however, is that very large amounts of information must be acquired in order to reduce the chances of a

false picture being suggested. This is arduous and time-consuming, and the results obtained are hard to present accurately.

This problem is even more pronounced when lexis, or vocabulary, is considered as a marker of style. No one doubts that certain authors often prefer one word to another (for example, both George Moore and Vladimir Nabokov usually use the word 'anent' in place of the more common 'about'), but to prove this on anything like an objective scale is almost impossible. The whole of a writer's work must be examined before any firm conclusions can be drawn, for clearly the same writer will change his vocabulary as he changes his subject matter. Even when, with the help of a computer, complete data is available, its implications are not necessarily obvious. It has been demonstrated that Shakespeare, for example, rarely uses words which relate to God or Christ (although his contemporaries often do), and this might cause us to reconsider our ideas about his understanding of Christianity. But most examinations of a writer's lexis yield either banal results or none at all.

One exception to this general pattern was the work undertaken by Alvar Ellegård. *Who was Junius?*, published in 1962, tried to solve a longstanding literary problem by linguistic means. 'Junius' was the author of a series of letters written to a London newspaper between 1769 and 1772. The letters, like many others of the time, were bitterly critical of the Government and the King. What distinguished them from the rest were, however, first, that they were beautifully written, masterpieces in sarcasm and wit; and, second, that no one knew who 'Junius' was. What Ellegård did was to analyse the lexis of the Junius letters and compare it with that of the various suggested authors. His work reads like a detective story, as avenues are explored and clues followed up. The conclusions drawn are lucidly expressed, and amply demonstrate the value of the statistical method for determining authorship. However, Ellegård was dealing with a comparatively small body of material, and with a problem that was clear-cut. The study of lexis on a larger scale is not as straightforward. First, one requires a computer to process the vast amount of information. Second, one has to be clear about what it is that close knowledge of a writer's vocabulary would help us with. Words work, it is suggested, on two axes, or paradigms. One is at the level of literal association, that demands a word like 'water' in the sentence 'he swam in the . . .'. The second is at the level of what one might

call symbolic, or extra-literal, association, that might wish to replace 'water' with, for example, 'sea'. The word 'sea' evokes all sorts of responses, romantic, emotional, which are lacking in the word 'water'. Literary language depends to a large extent upon the play of resonances produced by the choice of one word rather than another, and one sequence of words rather than another. A computer can only recognise the first, literal, aspect of lexis, and there is thus a danger of missing the subtleties of a writer's expression.

Each of the approaches to the language of literature outlined above is a perfectly valid method of exploring the construction and meaning of a text. In addition, there are many other equally valuable ways of tackling the subject that have not been mentioned here. The point of this survey has been to show a sample of the range of options available, and to suggest that each method is complementary to the rest. There is no right or wrong way to study stylistics, as long as the results obtained both satisfy literary intuition and are reproducible by another person using the same techniques.

Having given a general background to the study of literary language, let us now turn to systemic linguistics and learn how to use it in the analysis of fictional prose.

METHODOLOGY

Recent work in linguistics, using new descriptive techniques developed since the Second World War, has tended to focus on the study of spoken language. This is probably in reaction to traditional grammar's exclusive concentration on the written word. Furthermore, in contrast to traditional grammar's formulation of prescriptive rules about correct and incorrect sentences, postwar linguistics has eschewed the idea of there being a right or a wrong way to use language. It has chosen instead to describe the ways in which people actually do communicate in everyday life, rather than to tell them how they should. However, if we are to acquire a complete understanding of how language works, we must combine both the traditional and the more recent approaches to the study of language. For, on the one hand, written language still forms a very large part of linguistic communication and thus should