

Aspects of English

Series Editor JOHN SINCLAIR

LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

An Introductory Reader in Stylistics

Edited by Ronald Carter

Language and Literature

An Introductory Reader in Stylistics

Edited by

RONALD CARTER

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Editor: John Sinclair

Language and Literature

Series Editor's Introduction

This is a series of books about language, mainly English, from a practical point of view. Each volume deals with an important area of current interest and presents new material against a background of established scholarship. The authors are all experts in their subject, and in each case have written because they have something to say. The books are intended to appeal to serious readers who have a general or professional interest in language. Anyone with more than a casual curiosity about the sounds, structures, vocabulary or variety of English will find profitable reading in the series. For teachers and students, the books are intended as useful textbooks in their subject areas. Some indeed are provided with guidance for use in self-study or as course books. Some provide coverage of a subject by collecting and editing contributions by several different authors, offering a variety of approaches. Some present a personal, innovative point of view in familiar territory.

It is not assumed that the reader already has a comprehensive command of modern linguistics. Linguistics, the study of language for its own sake, is a subject which many find abstract and inaccessible. Although the books are substantial contributions to linguistics, they are written with attention to the needs of a broader readership than the community of academic linguists. Different traditions of linguistic study put the emphasis of the work at various points between *theory* and *description*. At the theoretical end the centre of interest is now highly formalised. A set of abstract statements gives the broad outline of how a language is organised – the main categories that are used, the types of rules allowed, and so on. The nineteen sixties enjoyed a period of intense theoretical work led by Noam Chomsky, and since then many linguists have returned to the job of description, of providing detailed accounts of the workings of individual languages.

As part of the inevitable reaction to a concentration on theory, people began to study areas which had been relatively neglected. For example, connected texts and spoken discourse, rather than individual sentences, became prominent during the nineteen seventies. The study of variety in language contrasted with the uniformity which was a useful simplification in formal theory. More recently still, the study of vocabulary is growing to match the more abstract realms of semantics. The return to an interest in description does not reject theory – in fact it poses questions which lead to a constant review of theories – but it means that fresh approaches can be developed in most areas, and this series of books will chart some of the important developments.

PROFESSOR JOHN M SINCLAIR
University of Birmingham

8 March 1982

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In case it be thought otherwise, I did do *some* of the work on this book myself and assume responsibility for what remains. In this work I owe more than can sometimes be imagined or adequately recompensed to my children, Matthew, Jennifer and Claire and to my wife, Jane Carter, for support which goes beyond the merely academic.

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Introduction

The point of this introduction is to acquaint readers with some of the basic issues and questions raised by stylistics in its application to the teaching and study of literature, and to explain some of the purposes and uses for this book. The application of linguistics to literature has aroused much discussion and heated debate, and continues to do so. But, as interest in language study and teaching revives across the whole curriculum, questions are raised concerning appropriate ways in which language can be studied, how it can be integrated with the study of literature, contribute to foreign-language teaching, and so on. (This book has as its main objective to explore some ways in which language and literature study can be integrated. The aims are modest and necessarily fairly controlled (see below, Section VI); where feasible, questions of the relevance of this approach to *teaching and learning* will be uppermost. Many theoretical questions have therefore to be left unanswered in a book of this kind; but most of the writers in this book – as practitioners of stylistics in their daily work – would argue that practical exploration of the kind suggested here ultimately works to focus issues and principles in usefully tangible ways.

In the six sections that follow I look at language and literature study from a broader theoretical perspective and point to some possible sources of misunderstanding about stylistics. The starting-point for this must be a discussion of some traditional, conventional and, it must be said, dominant models for the study of literature and literary meaning.

I Literary Meaning and the Literary Critic

As an example of what I think is generally understood by literary meaning, and of the particular form of literary criticism with which the kind of stylistic analysis exemplified in this book would be contrasted, I want to cite a short extract from a well-known and widely quoted book of novel criticism by F. R. Leavis. The extract is devoted to characterisation in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* and George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*:

It would hardly be said of Isabel Archer that the presentation of her is complete; it is characteristic of James's art to have made her an effective

enough presence for his purpose without anything approaching a 'wealth of psychological detail'. Her peculiar kind of impressiveness, in fact, is conditioned by her not being known inside out, and – we have to confess it – could not have been achieved by George Eliot. For it is fair to say that if James had met a Gwendolen Harbeth (at any rate an American one) he would have seen Isabel Archer; he immensely admired George Eliot's inwardness and completeness of rendering, but when he met the type in actual life and was prompted to the conception of the Portrait of a Lady, he saw her with the eyes of an American gentleman. One must add – an essential point – that he saw her as American.

It is, of course, possible to imagine a beautiful, clever and vital girl, with 'that sense of superior claims which made a large part of her consciousness' (George Eliot's phrase for Gwendolen, but it applies equally to Isabel), whose egotism yet shouldn't be as much open to the criticism of an intelligent woman as Gwendolen's. But it is hard to believe that, in life, she could be as free from qualities inviting a critical response as the Isabel Archer seen by James. (Leavis, 1964, pp. 110–11)

The first question to ask is: what kind of literary meaning is being sought out here? Leavis's primary appeal is to a mode of psychological and moral sensitivity in his readers which is not made explicit, but which is presumed to have derived from a particular life experience ('But it is hard to believe that, in life, she could be as free from qualities . . .'). The meaning sought appears to be connected with accuracy of representing a type in fiction ('that kind of girl') which can be felt to be true – but not too true to lack suggestiveness – as well as with passing judgement on the particular human characteristics depicted. In this respect, Eliot is adjudged to be the more consummate artist.

The second question is this: does Leavis make explicit the criteria whereby he arrives at such pronouncements? The answer is that he offers no operable principles of analysis. No criterion is supplied, for example, for determining how, precisely, Eliot promotes a particular awareness whereas James doesn't. The differences between them and the resulting preference are asserted not demonstrated. For a critic, too, who once wrote 'No treatment of poetry is worth much that does not keep very close to the concrete: there lies the problem of method' (Leavis, 1966:10), there is remarkably little textual substantiation for the points he adduces. As a result his argument here is, in fact, wholly declarative in mood with only very minimal clausal qualification or concession. Where verbs occur which might introduce some modalisation into his points they are either in semi-negative form ('It would hardly be said') or appear in parenthetical asides. In reality, the modals selected work only to underline the certainty and assertiveness of Leavis's discourse ('we *have to* confess it', 'One *must* add'). Furthermore, who is implied by his use of 'we' or 'one'? Presumably, not

simply Leavis himself. As Trevor Eaton has put it, commenting on similar prevalent usages in Leavis's literary criticism:

By this apparently innocent pronoun, he places his student in a dilemma: he either agrees with the assertion, in which case the master wins his point, or he disagrees and is placed on the defensive, for Leavis's tone suggests that non-acceptance entails insensitivity. (Eaton, 1978)

The assumption appears to be that 'we' are a community of readers whose sensitivity, awareness and moral judgement are such as not to require any more explicit reference. As a result, we are forced into the position of accepting connecting links or points of emphasis in his argument ('For', 'an essential point', 'yet', 'it is fair to say', 'in fact') which do not really exist. Throughout Leavis shows no willingness to indicate either the modality or selectivity of his assertions. His commentary is, to a considerable extent, characterised by impressionism, while his critical propositions are embedded.

It is, of course, a little unfair to cite critics' work in extract form or to take only a single example. But I do believe this mode of criticism to be largely representative of Leavis and of his particular orientation towards 'literary meaning' (see also Widdowson, 1975: 72-4, for further objections). Meaning is measured against an ostensibly common life experience; there is only minimal appeal to the medium from which the text is constructed; meaning is established without method. Leavis is not wholly typical of traditional literary criticism, but his 'style' is widely followed, not least by critics such as F. W. Bateson, Helen Vendler and others (see Bibliography) who have objected more strongly to linguistic criticism.¹ Even I. A. Richards and the American 'New Critics', though responsible through their advocacy of practical criticism for greater textual analysis, still tacitly share many of Leavis's assumptions. Where, in this book, reference is made to traditional literary criticism, it is generally to the kind of material and approach analysed here that I am pointing. As I see it, the main dangers are that the standards to which students are trained are those of the literary establishment; the 'classic' works to which they should be exposed are chosen for them by the more 'sensitive' readers. Those who do not develop the necessary sensitivity fall by the wayside or only 'learn' the judgements required of them.

It is important to recognise two more fundamental tenets in the approach to literary criticism of Leavis and his followers. One I have already hinted at. When Leavis undertakes analyses, he works within limits which are prescribed by his sense that a writer's language is a medium *through* which 'felt' life is registered. The critic analyses literary meaning with reference to such touchstones as the writer's openness to the complexity of experience which is reflected and, in the great writers in the tradition, controlled by language. To interrogate

the workings of this medium is not the business of the critic. In this scheme language becomes a kind of link between the essentiality of experience and the mature judgement of the writer. It is a precious link and therefore not to be tampered with. Such principles, in so far as they are articulated, do not allow of any consideration of the epistemological status of language. Where language is considered, it is as if it were only an analogy for something else.

The second fundamental tenet is linked with the first. For Leavis and, in fact, for most literary critics of most persuasions, it is a basic proposition that literary texts are sources of meaning in that they make statements about man and man in the world. Such a proposition is so rooted in the empirical and humanistic tradition of much Anglo-American criticism that it is now taken for granted. Criticism after Leavis has to a considerable extent acquiesced in the silences between his lines. We are usually taken to be sensitive and commonsensical enough not to need to have spelled out to us such obvious purposes of reading and criticising literary texts. To this end, language is seen as transparent in its opening on to the world, and writers use this medium to render its meanings. The relationship between language and the text and the world is essentially taken for granted and unproblematic.

This proposition is so basic that it needs to be stated. This is particularly so in the case of this reader, because not all the writers in this volume feel that the proposition is basic to what they are doing in their criticism or that it can pass unchallenged. It is important for readers of this book to be alert to assumptions in method, approach and principle, whether hidden or otherwise. The issue of criticism, meaning and language is taken up again in Section IV of this introduction. Two very useful sources of further discussion are Norris (1980) and Belsey (1980).

II Practical Criticism and Practical Stylistics

Since most readers who use this book will understand the term 'practical criticism', or will actually be practising it as part of their literary studies, defining 'practical stylistics' in relation to practical criticism seems to be a sensible starting-point. It is particularly necessary, however, because (although there are some similarities) practical stylistics is in many ways quite different from practical criticism.

Practical stylistics is a process of literary text analysis which starts from a basic assumption that the primary interpretative procedures used in the reading of a literary text are *linguistic* procedures. As readers of literature we are involved first and foremost in a response to language. And we perform this act of interpretative response by reference to what we already know of the language as native users of that language.

But, often, what we know is *only* intuitive. We sense that what we are hearing or reading is odd or belongs to a special register or code of the language (e.g. that it is legal language, or sounds harmonious, or seems to be in no way abnormal at all). Such intuitions and sense impressions are undeniably responses to language, and have formed the basis of much valuable literary criticism. But there is inevitably difficulty in properly accounting for these intuitions. Students of literature frequently say that they are experiencing particular tones, moods or feelings from contact with the text, but often lack the confidence or a method that will give them the confidence, to explore more fully and then explicitly formalise those same feelings. Thus, the *precise* nature of the interpretative processes readers undergo tends to remain obscure to us. The implicit and intuitive nature of our operational knowledge of our native language is, I believe, very much at the root of this obscurity.

There are, of course, serious objections raised to making things more precise. Indeed, we may prefer things to stay as they are and not analyse language. For, if we do so, it is feared, we may destroy the primacy of our intuitions or confuse in some way the nature of our response by subjecting to close scrutiny something which is precious and individual. As we have seen, this is very much a Leavisite position. Although my view is that critics of practical stylistics often misunderstand or misuse the term, many teachers and students of literature feel they are engaging in something which should not be allowed to become too 'scientific'. Within what is practised as practical criticism, appeal is made to language but in the belief that general ideas about the nature of language or general reference to words and their organisation are sufficient. Frequently such reference is to whatever bits of language strike the critic as interesting.

It is, however, a basic principle of a linguistic approach to literary study and criticism that without *analytic* knowledge of the rules and conventions of normal linguistic communication we cannot adequately validate these intuitive interpretations either for ourselves or for others. In other words, I want to argue here for three main points of principle and practice:

- (1) that the greater our detailed knowledge of the workings of the language system, the greater our capacity for insightful awareness of the effects produced by literary texts;
- (2) that a principled analysis of language can be used to make our commentary on the effects produced in a literary work less impressionistic and subjective;
- (3) that because it will be rooted in a systematic awareness of language, bits of language will not be merely 'spotted' and evidence gathered in an essentially casual and haphazard manner. Statements will be made with recognition of the fact that analysis of one linguistic pattern requires

reference to, or checking against, related patterns across the text. Evidence for the statements will thus be provided in an overt or principled way. The conclusions can be *attested* and *retrieved* by another analyst working on the same data with the same method. There is also less danger that we may overlook textual features crucial to the significance of the work.

In fact it is essentially its recourse to this systematic and explicit knowledge of communicative and linguistic norms which distinguishes practical stylistics from practical criticism.

Are there any presuppositions underlying work in practical stylistics which need to be clarified? There is perhaps a further point which needs to be underlined. It is that stylistic analysis can provide the means whereby the student of literature can relate a piece of literary writing to his own experience of language and so can extend that experience. It can assist in the transfer of interpretative skills which is one of the essential purposes of literary education. Hence by appealing primarily to what people already know, that is, their own language, there is no reason why practical stylistics cannot provide a procedure for demystifying literary texts. We have here a basis from which to work out for ourselves what, in the fullest sense, is meant. We do not need to rely on the passing down of judgements or information from the literary establishment. We can make our own interpretations and do so in a relatively objective manner.² The more confident we become in analysing our language, the better equipped and more confident we shall become in adducing linguistic facts to substantiate our intuitions and use them to make sound literary judgements.

It is this basic presupposition of most work within the field of practical stylistics, then, which engages centrally with the *pedagogy* of the subject. Of all the linguistic approaches to literature, practical stylistics recommends itself as the most suitable introductory mode of analysis for learning about language, the workings of language in literature and for developing the confidence to work systematically towards interpretations of literary texts. It all depends, of course, what you want to do with your analysis, but practical stylistics works in an easily accessible way and has infinite possibilities for extension. Experience of teaching integrated courses in linguistics and literature to first-year undergraduates, English teachers on in-service courses, foreign students of English, and senior-school students suggests that its techniques and aims are fairly readily assimilated. It is important that in many respects it is an extension of practical criticism and thus keeps within what is for most students an existing framework and mode of understanding. It is for this pedagogic reason that readers are advised to begin using this book by first tackling the chapters on practical stylistics.