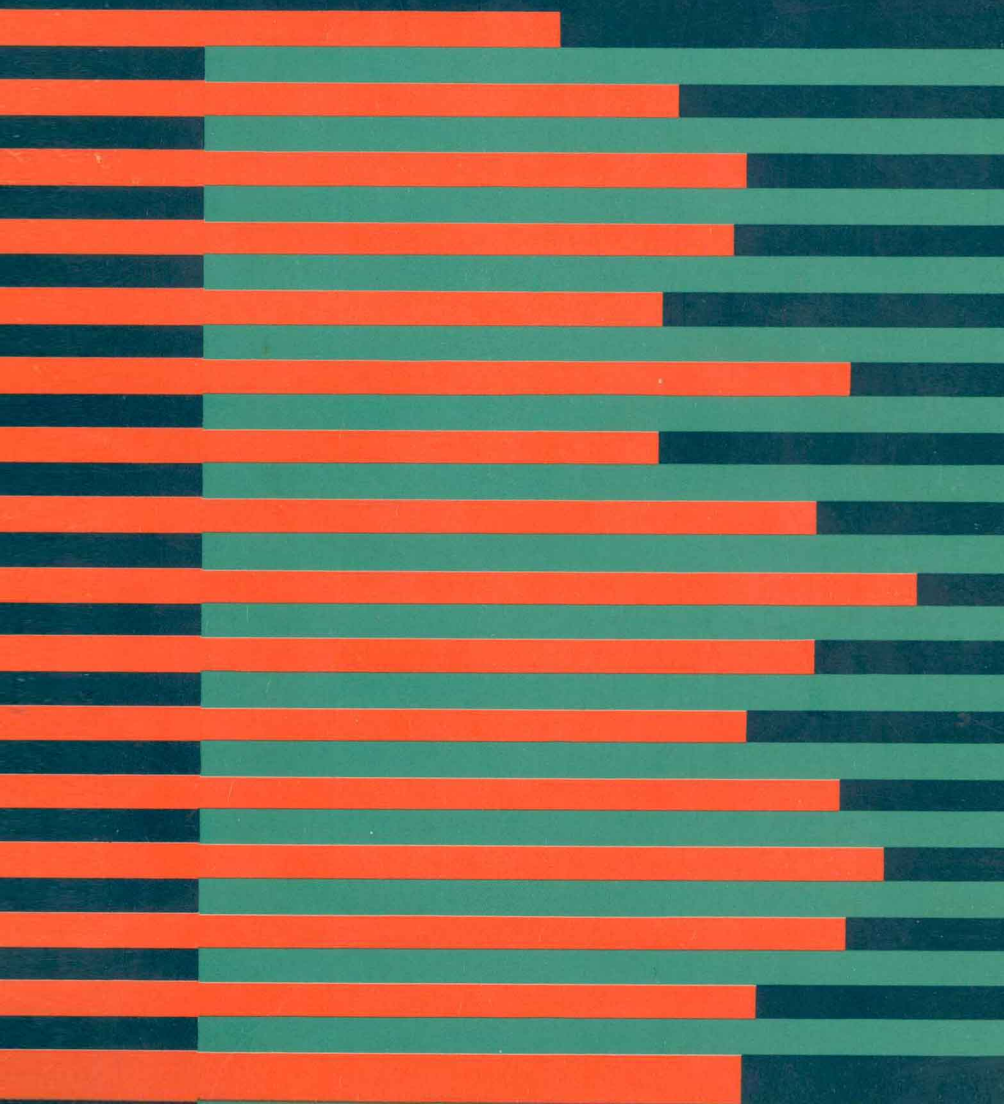


Applied Linguistics and Language Study
General Editor: C.N. Candlin

Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature

H.G. Widdowson



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Preface

Let me try to select some of the reasons why I regard Henry Widdowson's book as making a considerable contribution to extending our view of the principles underlying language teaching and curriculum design, and not only as an expansion of the *Applied Linguistics and Language Study* series to the field of analysing and appreciating literary texts. His concentration on understanding discourse and his view of stylistics as a dynamic way of mediating between linguistics and literary criticism always possesses a wider perspective than mollifying the literary critic's suspicion of linguistic analysis.

Dr Widdowson begins by distinguishing the notion *discipline* from the pedagogic *subject* in order to demonstrate that stylistics is Janus-like in the way it can be treated, for example, at school or university, as a way from linguistics to literary study or the reverse. To understand this bidirectionality he explains distinctions between the linguist's *text* and the critic's *messages* by introducing the concept of *discourse* as a means through which to understand the communicative value of passages of language. Now it is this emphasis on communicative value which is of greatest importance to the development of teaching materials for language learning, whether oriented towards the study of literary texts or not. For too long materials have remained at the surface patterns of linguistic *text*, and have not drawn learners towards an understanding of the layers of meaning which can be peeled off from utterances; learners have seen sentences only as illustrations of grammatical patterns and have not asked pragmatic and sociolinguistic questions of what communicative value they have in given settings.

In discussing this relationship between the grammaticalness of text and the interpretability of discourse, the author does more than to suggest ways in which linguistic elements function to communicative effect. His emphasis on training the student in *interpretative*

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procedures as a counterweight to 'told' meanings suggests teaching strategies which would have wider application than the treatment of literary texts. How frequently in language teaching textbooks is the chance missed for the student himself to discover rules of language and language use; implicit here is an alternative pedagogic approach to language teaching, well exemplified by the author in his chapter on *Exercises in Literary Understanding*.

Although I have stressed the book's wider importance, it has literary texts as its object of study, and here, particularly in Chapter Four, Dr Widdowson looks at the social context of non-literary messages as a way of highlighting the nature of literary communication as suspended from the accepted sociolinguistic bases of everyday interaction. His detailed investigation of literary texts 'going beyond the limits of the conventionally communicable' serves to make plain the patterning that is possible even where, as in his literary examples, conventional social and grammatical rules are breached.

Finally, one can take the author's tenet that stylistics should develop the individual capacity of response to language use to show how this and the views expressed earlier on the nature of discourse combine to suggest ways of approaching other areas of English language teaching. There is much in common with Dr Widdowson's approach to literary texts in ways of analysing the communicative value of conversations, and, though at first most remote from the examples and thesis of the book, with the understanding of the communicative processes of science central to the teaching of reading comprehension in an ESP framework. Though literary texts have their own rules, understanding authors' messages in technical texts involves similar interpretative techniques and most certainly rests on similar appreciation of the discursal value of connected language.

Christopher N. Candlin, 1975
General Editor

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Aims and perspectives

This book might be described as an exercise in applied stylistic analysis. Its principal aim can be stated quite briefly: to present a discussion of an approach to the *study* of literature and a demonstration of its possible relevance to the *teaching* of literature. The approach with which I shall be concerned draws a good deal from linguistics and this discipline will provide the general perspective adopted in the discussion. This does not mean, however, that I shall exclude those considerations of interpretation and artistic effect which are the immediate concern of literary criticism. I do not believe that any approach which does so can be said to be dealing with literature at all in any meaningful sense, and in fact most stylistic analysis, even that which purports to follow a strictly linguistic line, is ultimately based on the kind of intuitions which it is the purpose of literary scholarship to develop. I shall, then, move towards literature from a linguistics direction but expect my approach to converge with that of literary criticism at several points on the way.

The perspective of the discussion in the first part of the book is also of course partly determined by the demonstration in the second part. My purpose is to show the relevance of stylistic analysis to the teaching of literature and not (except incidentally) to the practice of literary criticism as a discipline. I believe that linguistics does have something to contribute to literary criticism, just as literary criticism has something to contribute to linguistics, but it is not my present purpose to explore this area of mutual benefit. Over the past few years there have been a number of angry exchanges between scholars of these different persuasions and they have provided a rather distressing spectacle of mutual misunderstanding and distrust. This controversy has not only done considerable disservice to both disciplines but has also deprived the teacher of literature of an opportunity to develop his own methodology. It is this second consequence with which I shall be concerned in this book. I do not

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wish to become involved in the controversy about the relevance of stylistics to the *discipline* of literary criticism: my concern is to consider how it can be of relevance to the teaching of literature as a *subject*.

This distinction between a discipline and a subject is, in my view, a crucial one and in a subsequent chapter (Chapter 5) I shall be discussing it in detail in relation to literary studies. Meanwhile the basis of the distinction needs to be made clear. I want to define a discipline as a set of abilities, concepts, ways of thinking, associated with a particular area of human enquiry. Geneticists, biochemists, linguists and literary critics for example all follow certain principles of enquiry which characterise their different disciplines. But students are not geneticists or biochemists or linguists or literary critics: they are in the process of acquiring principles not putting them into practice, and some of them (indeed most of them) will only acquire a certain number of these principles and will never achieve the discipline as such at all. This is even more true of schoolchildren. They do not have disciplines like genetics or biochemistry on their timetables but something called 'science': they do not have linguistics and literary criticism but something called 'English language' and 'English literature'. 'Science', 'English language' and 'English literature' are subjects, not disciplines.* Obviously the higher the educational level the more the subject which is studied approximates to the discipline whose acquisition represents the ultimate academic terminal behaviour of the learner. But the majority of learners will, of course, never reach this point. It is for this reason that the terminal behaviour expected of them cannot be the disciplines to which the subjects they are studying are most closely related.

The point I wish to stress is that subjects must be defined at different educational levels in terms of pedagogic objectives, whereas disciplines are defined in terms of theoretical requirements.† Since some of the pupils at a certain level will go on to a higher level the subject has to be defined in such a way as to provide a basis for development, as a stage in a process. Since some pupils will not be proceeding

* 'Physics', 'chemistry' and 'biology' also appear on timetables, of course, but they are pedagogically defined subjects and not simply projections of the disciplines which bear the same names.

† It might be noted that one of the most interesting and difficult problems which arises from this distinction is that explanations which are pedagogically satisfactory in that they make appeal to the pupil's own experience and come within his conceptual range may be unacceptable in terms of the more exact and complex concepts of the disciplines to which the subjects relate.

further in their education, it has also to be defined as a complete process which will fulfil some more general educational purpose. The difficulty in deciding on what constitutes a subject lies primarily in the reconciling of these terminal and non-terminal objectives. This difficulty does not only arise in devising teaching programmes in secondary schools. It arises also (although this may not be very readily acknowledged) in university courses. Very few students go on to do research and to be fully initiated into the discipline of their teachers. A student of literature does not graduate as a literary critic any more than a student of economics graduates as an economist.

It is, then, the relevance of stylistic analysis to literature as a subject that I wish to explore in this book. Of course, since a discipline (or a combination of disciplines) provides the elemental material from which subjects are compounded, what is of relevance to a given subject is likely to have implications for the discipline as well. If the reader wishes to draw out such implications for himself, so much the better but it is not my purpose to dwell on them or to make them explicit.

So much for the aims of this book. The perspectives require a rather more detailed explanation. I have spoken of a linguistic approach and of stylistic analysis and I should make it clear what I intend by these expressions. By 'stylistics' I mean the study of literary discourse from a linguistics orientation and I shall take the view that what distinguishes stylistics from literary criticism on the one hand and linguistics on the other is that it is essentially a means of linking the two and has (as yet at least) no autonomous domain of its own. One can conduct enquiries of a linguistic kind without any reference to literary criticism, and one can conduct enquiries in literary criticism without any reference to linguistics. Some linguists have suggested that the latter is impossible since the literary critic must be involved in a discussion about language. But there are all kinds of ways of talking about language and the linguist's way is only one. The linguist would be first to complain if everyone who talked about language claimed to be talking linguistics. Stylistics, however, involves both literary criticism and linguistics, as its morphological make-up suggests: the 'style' component relating it to the former and the 'istics' component to the latter.

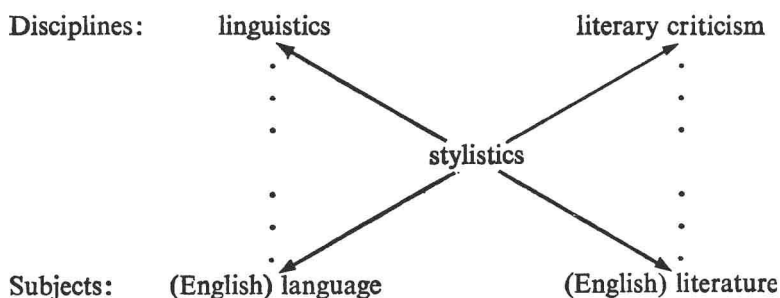
I should add that when I speak of autonomy, I do not wish to imply that linguistics and literary criticism are areas of enquiry which are entirely detached from those of other disciplines: both, for example, have considerable overlap with psychology. But the fact

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that they draw ideas and techniques from other disciplines does not prevent them from being autonomous. The point I want to make is that, at the present stage of its development, stylistics does not have this status of autonomy, though one might hope that in time it might achieve it.

The view taken in this book, then, is that stylistics is an area of mediation between two disciplines. How far such a mediation is necessary or desirable is, as I have said, a question which I want to keep beyond the scope of this present discussion. What I wish to show is that stylistics can provide a way of mediating between two *subjects*: English language and literature, leaving inexplicit whatever implications arise as to the way it might serve to relate the disciplines from which these subjects derive their content.

We might express the relationships we have been discussing as follows:



This simple diagram seeks to capture the fact that stylistics is neither a discipline nor a subject in its own right, but a means of relating disciplines and subjects. As the diagram indicates, this relationship is not only between discipline and discipline, subject and subject but also between subject and discipline and the reverse. In other words I am making the claim that stylistics can serve as a means whereby literature and language as subjects can by a process of gradual approximation move towards both linguistics and literary criticism, and also a means whereby these disciplines can be pedagogically treated to yield different subjects. Thus stylistics can, I suggest, provide for the progression of a pupil from either language or literature towards either literary criticism or linguistics.

What I understand by stylistics is perhaps now clear enough. Four other terms in the diagram remain undefined. How the two subjects might be defined will be taken up in the second part of the book (in Chapter 5) when I attempt to demonstrate the pedagogic appli-

cations of the discussion in the first part. This discussion depends, however, on an understanding of the nature of the two disciplines or, rather, on an understanding of what I conceive their nature to be.

I assume that the ultimate purpose of literary criticism is to interpret and evaluate literary writings as works of art and that the primary concern of the critic is to explicate the individual message of the writer in terms which make its significance clear to others. His task is to decipher a message encoded in an unfamiliar way, to express its meaning in familiar and communal terms and thereby to provide the private message with a public relevance. This activity is not essentially different from that of the critics of other art forms. They decipher non-verbal messages into a verbal form whereas the literary critic deciphers messages from one verbal form into another. Now obviously to do this he must be sensitive to language but his concern is not principally with the way the signals of the artist are constructed but with the underlying message which an interpretation of these signals will reveal. Furthermore, he is less interested in devising a metalanguage into which the original message can be transferred than in conveying the essential significance through exegesis and evaluation and using whatever means of expression seem most appropriate, often drawing on the same kind of figurative and evocative uses of language which characterise the message he is interpreting.

The literary critic, then, is primarily concerned with messages and his interest in codes lies in the meanings they convey in particular instances of use. The linguist, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with the codes themselves and particular messages are of interest in so far as they exemplify how the codes are constructed. Given a piece of literature, a poem for example, the linguist will be interested in finding out how it exemplifies the language system, and if it contains curiosities of usage how these curiosities might be accounted for in grammatical terms. This is not to say that the linguist will necessarily ignore the meanings which the poem conveys and indeed, it may well be the case that the linguist's analysis of the language of a poem is dependent on some prior intuitive interpretation of what the poem is about. But although interpretation may be an aid to his analysis it is not its aim. The literary critic, however, takes interpretation as his aim. He is interested in finding out what aesthetic experience or perception of reality the poem is attempting to convey and his observation of how the language system is used will serve only as a means to this end. The purpose of stylistics is to link the two approaches by extending the linguist's literary intuitions

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and the critic's linguistic observations and making their relationship explicit.

The linguist, then, directs his attention primarily to how a piece of literature exemplifies the language system. We will say that he treats literature as *text*, and in the following chapter I shall be examining the kind of results which emerge from such a treatment. The literary critic searches for underlying significance, for the essential artistic vision that the poem embodies and we will say that he treats literary works as *messages*. Between these two is an approach to literature which attempts to show specifically how elements of a linguistic text combine to create messages, how, in other words, pieces of literary writing function as a form of communication. Let us say that this approach treats literature as *discourse*. It is this approach (discussed in Chapters 3 and 4) which is most centrally stylistic in the sense in which I have defined that term in the preceding discussion, and which, in my view, promises to have most potential value for the teaching of literature.

I must make one further point about the scope of this book. I have made reference in these introductory remarks both to literature in general and to English literature in particular and I should make it clear that the discussion that follows draws exclusively on literature in the English language as the source of illustration. I assume, however, that a good deal of the discussion has a more general relevance and could, in principle, be illustrated by reference to literature in other languages. Similarly, although my concern is with the teaching of English language and literature, I should like to think that much of what I have to say might have some bearing on the problems of teaching language and literature in general.

Literature as text

Generally speaking, literature has attracted the attention of linguists for two quite opposing reasons. One of them is that it represents data which can be accounted for in terms of models of linguistic description and the other that it represents data which cannot be so accounted for. The first reason is expressed by Halliday as follows:

Linguistics is not and will never be the whole of literary analysis, and only the literary analyst—not the linguist—can determine the place of linguistics in literary studies. But if a text is to be described at all, then it should be described properly; and this means by the theories and methods developed in linguistics, the subject whose task is precisely to show how language works.*

In Halliday's view (at least, as expressed in the article from which the above quotation is taken) the description of the linguistic elements that occur in a piece of literary writing, the account of how it exemplifies the system of the language, is part of the analysis of the piece of writing as a literary work. In this article, Halliday considers Yeats' poem *Leda and the Swan* and describes how two parts of the system of English are exemplified in it: the first being the nominal group and the second the verbal group. What I want to do now is to consider Halliday's claim by looking at his discussion of the first of these. We will try to establish what contribution his observations make to an understanding of the poem: whether and to what extent they can be regarded as a part of a literary analysis.

LEDA AND THE SWAN

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, the thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

* M. A. K. Halliday, 'Descriptive Linguistics in Literary Studies' in Angus McIntosh and M. A. K. Halliday *Patterns of Language: Papers in general, descriptive and applied linguistics*, Longman, 1966, p. 67.

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How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

As Halliday observes, the definite article in English can function in a number of different ways and can be distinguished in the grammar accordingly. In general, its function is to signal that the nominal group in which it appears constitutes a specific reference. This reference may be of three kinds. Firstly, it may be contained within the group itself in the form of a modifier (which precedes the head word in the group) or of a qualifier (which follows it). Thus, in the nominal group *the white goddess* the modifier *white* in association with the definite article specifies a particular goddess. Similarly, *the goddess in the temple* has definite reference since the qualifier *in the temple* in association with the definite article again specifies a particular goddess. Where the definite article signals that some other element in the nominal group (modifier or qualifier or both) indicates a specific reference, the article is said to be cataphoric. This might be expressed as follows:

	M(odifier)	H(ead)	Q(ualifier)
The	white	goddess	
The		goddess	in the temple
The	white	goddess	in the temple

A second kind of reference is one which links the head of the nominal group with something previously mentioned. If I have been talking about a goddess, for example, I may say something like 'The goddess was a figure of great mystery' and here I specify again a particular goddess, one who had been previously talked about. Where the definite article signals that the nominal group relates to what has been referred to before, as in this case, the article is said to be anaphoric.

A third kind of reference is said to occur when, given a certain situation, the head word itself is sufficient to identify something specific and requires no additional elements in the nominal group