

TOWARDS A CULTURAL APPROACH TO STYLISTICS

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the different approaches to stylistics, here regarded as the cutting edge in literary-linguistic enquiry, and presents the possible benefits of a contextualized stylistics to the teaching of literature. Starting from the assumption that stylistics is a very troubled and slippery concept, it points out how the different linguistic approaches to the literary text have moved from universals and microlinguistic observations to the study of context and its influence in the way people behave, speak and communicate. The main objective of this paper is to argue that stylistics can sit very comfortably between language and literature, contribute to the understanding of the text as cultural praxis, and thus work as a bridge between cultural, literary and linguistic studies. To support this argument, some of the different lights under which stylistics has been seen are discussed. The paper concludes by offering a theoretical model which may help describe a contextualized pedagogical stylistics.

KEY WORDS

Stylistics, cultural studies, literary awareness, pedagogy.

RESUMEN

El presente trabajo discute los diferentes enfoques de la estilística –aquí considerada como interface entre el estudio literario y el lingüístico– al presentar los posibles beneficios de una estilística contextualizada en la enseñanza de literatura. A partir del presupuesto que la estilística es un concepto problemático y escurridizo, se señala cómo los diferentes abordajes lingüísticos al texto literario se han desplazado de los universales y observaciones microlingüísticas al estudio del contexto y su influencia sobre la forma en que las personas se comportan, hablan y se comunican. El principal objetivo de este trabajo es argumentar que la estilística puede situarse confortablemente entre la lingüística y la literatura, contribuye a la comprensión del texto como prácti-

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ca cultural, y funciona como puente entre los estudios culturales, literarios y lingüísticos. Para fundamentar este argumento se discuten algunas de las diferentes visiones bajo las cuales se ha visto la estilística. El trabajo concluye ofreciendo un modelo teórico que puede ayudar a describir una pedagogía estilística contextualizada.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Estilística, estudios culturales, percepción literaria, pedagogía.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article discute différentes approches de la stylistique, vue ici comme le plus haut stade de la recherche en linguistique littéraire, et présente les avantages possibles de la linguistique contextualisée pour l'enseignement de la littérature. Partant de la supposition que la stylistique est un concept problématique de difficile appréhension, il montre à quel point les différentes approches linguistiques du texte littéraire sont passées des observations générales et microlinguistiques à l'étude du contexte et de ses influences sur la façon dont les gens se comportent, parlent et communiquent. Le premier objectif de cet article est d'affirmer que la linguistique peut se trouver bien à l'aise entre le langage et la littérature, contribuer à la compréhension du texte comme une praxis culturelle, et par là fonctionner comme un pont entre les études culturelles, littéraires et linguistiques. Pour soutenir cet argument nous discutons quelques aspects sous lesquels la linguistique a été en général vue. L'article propose, en conclusion, un modèle théorique qui peut aider à décrire la stylistique pédagogique contextualisée.

MOTS-CLÉ

Linguistique, études culturelles, conscience littéraire, pédagogie.

1. INTRODUCTION

Defining stylistics is almost an impossible task. Its area is hard to limit: is it a linguistic discipline or a method for literary criticism and text appreciation? Can it ever overcome discussions of objectivity or subjectivity in interpretations? Does it have pedagogical value? If so, how? From its inception, the history of stylistics has been shaped by debate and lack of consensus. If, on the one hand, Meyer-Lübke in 1899 had avoided stylistics claiming it was the study of language as art (in Ullmann, 1966, p. 99), in 1909, Bally excluded literary works from his investigation and studied expressive elements only in everyday speech. And yet, stylistics has not disappeared from the map of language and literature studies. To use Compagnon's (1998, p. 179) metaphor, "le

style, aujourd'hui, renaît de ces cendres et porte beau". In fact, one hundred years later, stylistics is still alive, despite Roy Harris's (2000) more recent attempt to describe it as a project which failed, a "forlorn attempt to validate metalanguage". These attacks have been part of the history of stylistics, the overall picture being one of successive crises and myriad definitions.

If the problems begin at definitions, they continue through determining its scope and affiliation. Does stylistics belong to linguistics or to literary criticism? As Toolan (1996, p. 117) puts it, "in the last fifteen years or so a new polyphony of contending approaches, subdisciplines, and agendas... has emerged. So many formerly cast-iron and irrefutable distinctions, in both linguistic and literary criticism, are now acknowledged to be disconcertingly vulnerable to challenge". Perhaps it would be easier to accept the fact that the area is too fuzzy to be dealt with but that we just cannot do without it because stylistics offers a method of systematising what has been called the "elusive" (Widdowson, 1992) element in literature. It provides guidelines and the hook students need to make their way into the text. In fact, stylistics has been shown to be a very potent tool for the teaching of texts which are treasured by certain communities as valuable (Carter & Long, 1987; Zyngier, 1994; Carter & McRae, 1996; Carter, 1997, among others). To support my argument, I will describe some of the different lights under which stylistics has been seen, discuss some of its major opposing voices, and provide a theoretical model which may help describe a contextualized pedagogical stylistics (see also Bex, Burke & Stockwell, 2000).

2. INITIAL PREMISES, MAJOR OPPOSITIONS

In order to clear the ground, we can start from two premises that seem to be shared by all stylisticians:

- a. Stylistics can sit comfortably between language and literature. It can contribute to the understanding of the text as cultural practice; it can work as a bridge between cultural, literary and linguistic studies.
- b. Its key-concepts, from Bally through Halliday's sociosemiotic approach, have remained the same: to investigate the effects of linguistic choices.

Here is how Crystal (1989, p. 66) defines the area:

Style is seen as the (conscious or unconscious) selection of a set of linguistic features from all the possibilities in a language. The **effects** these features convey can be understood only by intuitively sensing the **choices** that have been made ... and it is usually enough simply to respond to the effect in this way. But there are often occasions when we have to develop a more analytical approach... Here ... our intuition needs to be supplemented by a more objective account of style. It is this approach which is known as *stylistics*.

So, if choice and effect are alternative ways of interacting with and responding to meaning, and if meaning is culturally-based, then stylistics is cultural. Firth (1958, p. 184), whose work inspired the functional turn of linguistics, had defined stylistics as a field of research which investigates the way a speaker fuses “the elements of habit, custom, tradition, the element of the past, and the element of innovation, of the moment, in which the future is being born” “in verbal creation”. So, if stylistics hasn’t changed as regards its basic tenets, what has? I believe it is the glasses stylisticians wear.

What follows are some of the arguments against stylistics Carter & Walker (1989, p. 3) collected:

- Stylistics is only concerned with the words on the page, as if meaning were confined to the language of the text (see also Harris 2000).
- Stylistics disregards the fact that the reader starts from an ideological position and cannot escape it.
- Stylistics is a-historical.
- Stylistics does not question the institutionalization of literature and literary language.

Statements such as these suffer from anachronism because they do not take into consideration new developments in the area. So, in order to explain what I call contextualized stylistics, a term proposed by Weber (1996), who suggested the name but did not define it, I would like to trace the history of some of these ways of dealing with the text, all of which, in a certain way, have contributed to the picture we are able to draw today. I would like to point out that this categorisation is a simplified overview of the developments of the field in the last 40 years. I start from Jakobson’s seminal “Closing statement” of 1958 which, according to Fowler, inaugurated what he called *New Stylistics* (in Verdonk, 1986). My strategy here is to join the approaches into roughly two main groups. Table 1 below offers a summary:

Table 1. Main approaches to stylistics.

<i>TEXT-ORIENTED</i>	<i>CONTEXT-ORIENTED</i>
FORMALIST	PRAGMATIC
MENTALIST	RADICAL
TEXTLINGUISTIC	EMPIRICAL

3. TEXT-ORIENTED STYLISTICS

a. *Formalist*

I prefer the term formalist stylistics to what is generally called “linguistic stylistics” because if, as Halliday (1967) points out, stylistics is the linguistic study of literary texts, then calling it “linguistic” would be a tautology. A grandchild of Russian Formalism and an offspring of Structuralism at the peak of its maturity, this approach became more radical as a number of analysts from the tradition of Practical Criticism resorted to aspects of linguistics in search of a rigour Practical Criticism did not offer. Their strategy was to concentrate on the text as an object and their main interests remained on the formalistic and mechanical description of patterns in phonology, lexis, and syntax at sentence level. In his early years, Sinclair (1963, pp. 98-99) wrote what we can call a “declaration of principles” of this approach:

Literature is not a living organism, it is stone dead; it is marks on paper, or particular frequencies of the sound wave, or the visual and aural phenomena at a dramatic performance... poetry *is* the lines, and nothing else.

It is this way of dealing with texts which is always criticised whenever stylistics is under attack. More recently, Mackay (1996) (1999) has resumed Fish’s (1973) criticism on this particular point. It is true that a formalist orientation may turn out interesting lists of features and work for statistical accounts, but it disregards the way literature functions in context.

b. *Mentalist*

Also mostly descriptive, this approach follows transformational-generative grammar and the Chomskyan model which influenced the sixties. Toolan (1990, p. 2) criticises it for being too narrow. In his words,

it follows the “microlinguistic turn of generativism”. Mentalist stylisticians value the relation of language to mind.

A representative example of a mentalist stylistic approach is Thorne’s article “Generative Grammar and Stylistic Analysis” (1981, p. 44). Here Thorne is concerned, like the early Chomsky, with grammaticality and acceptability of forms. He equates the definition of stylistics with judgements on manifestations of linguistic competence. Thorne proposes that a grammatical model be developed for each poem. He also suggests an investigation on how the surface structure reflects the deep structure in a specific poem. According to him,

... the basic postulates of both studies (generative grammar explicitly, traditional stylistics implicitly) are mentalistic. In both cases, the most important data are responses relating to what is intuitively known about language structure.

These notions imply a pre-existing norm. Thorne criticises Saussurean linguistics, and consequently linguistics stylistics, for being concerned only with what is observable, that is, with “surface structure”. He holds that stylistic judgements belong to the area defined as “deep structure”. Cook (1992, p. 71) points out that the metaphor deep/surface is somewhat pejorative. Surface is associated to “trivial, false and empty-headed”, whereas deep is “serious, genuine and thoughtful”. In this sense, mentalist stylisticians believed they were engaging in more complex and meaningful analyses. To those interested in this approach, Freeman (1970) has collected many essays which investigate texts from a generative-transformational perspective.

c. *Textlinguistic*

With the development of textlinguistics in the seventies, a new wave of analysts began working on suprasentential level. Also concerned with form, they differed from formalist linguists, as now they saw the text as a unit, not as a string of sentences. For instance, textlinguists may apply narrative organisation to the study of literary texts. They may also investigate intersentential cohesion, look for patterns such as problem-solution (Hoey, 1983) to point out textual macrostructures (van Dijk, 1977).

It is here that the term *discourse* also comes into the picture. I want to make clear that when I refer to discourse, I am only referring to the written form and leaving out all instances of spoken language. Textlin-

guists place their work on the level of discourse. In this case, the term *discourse* is equivalent to *text* and can be defined as “a continuous stretch of language larger than a sentence...” (Nunan, 1993, p. 5). However, to other linguists, *discourse* means language in use and as such implies “... the interpretation of the communicative event in context” (Nunan, 1993, pp. 6-7). Based on Leech’s arguments, Table 2 may help clarify the main differences between formalist and functionalist approaches:

Table 2. Formalism vs. Functionalism.

<i>Formalists</i>	<i>Functionalists</i>
language as a mental phenomenon	language as a social phenomenon
linguistic universals derive from a common linguistic inheritance of the human species (nature)	linguistic universals derive from universal uses to which language is put in human societies (nurture)
language acquisition explained in terms of a built-in human capacity to learn	language acquisition results from the development of communicative needs and abilities in society
language is an autonomous system	language is related to its social function

As Table 2 indicates, context to functionalists is not only the language that surrounds a piece of text, but involves non-linguistic or experiential situations. This perspective has led to context-oriented forms of stylistics. Contextualized stylistics is then an abstraction. It is an umbrella term which refers to all those approaches which consider literature as an event within a specific situation.

4. CONTEXT-ORIENTED STYLISTICS

a. *Pragmatic*

Here, communicative behaviour begins to be privileged. Pragmatic-oriented stylisticians look at everyday conversation as a means to understand literary discourse. According to Leech (1983), it is the tendency to consider the text from an interactive point of view. Fowler (1979, p. 15) explains: “At a more ‘superficial’ end of linguistics, illocutionary or pragmatic theory leads us to study explicitly *manipulative* constructions such as imperatives, interrogatives, responses, etc. At a more abstract level, implicature, presupposition, and other assumptions

... are highly promising for literary theory and analysis". Carter & Simpson (1989) offer a collection of articles which stand as examples of this approach.

b. Radical

It was Burton in 1982 who coined the term **radical stylistics**. The distinctive element of this approach is the critics' search for the ideological imprint of the text. Like pragmatic stylisticians, ideologically-oriented analysts go beyond text level into the social and historical forces which influence its production and reception. Burton's arguments are that if texts depend on sociocultural and political determinants, they are subject to value-judgement (Eagleton, 1983; Graff, 1990) and these value judgements should be discussed in clear terms. A text is a social construct, a part of a socio-economic, political and literary tradition (Durant & Fabb, 1990; Montgomery et al., 1992). Pratt (1989, p. 21) argues that "... an understanding of the social, historical and ideological dimensions of discourse can contribute a great deal to the interests of aesthetics". Van Peer (1991, p. 130) adds that "textuality is partly a linguistic characteristic and partly *the result of socio-cultural forces* which provide the text its place and function within society as a whole". Birch (1989, p. 167) shows where cultural studies ties in neatly with literature when he states that stylistics is "a study not just of structures of language and texts, but of the people and institutions that shape the various ways language means".

c. Empirical

What I here call empirical stylistics is the approach that I believe best accommodates developments in linguistic, literary and cultural theory. It results from advances in what has been known as the Empirical Study of Literature (ESL). As a movement, ESL began in Germany in 1973 with the NIKOL research group at Bielefeld University (S. J. Schmidt, P. Finke, W. Kindt, J. Wիրrer, R. Zobel). In 1980, research continued with a new NIKOL group at Siegen University (S. J. Schmidt, A. Barsh, H. Hautmeier, D. Meutsch, G. Rusch, and R. Viehoff). In 1987, the International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature (IGEL) was founded. One of their main tenets was that text-meaning is not an intrinsic property of the physical text and that meaning is created in the process of response. They propose a shift of interest from text to

text-focusing activities; from structures to functions and processes; from the literary object to the literary system. Hence, LITERATURE is more than a collection of texts. It is an event requiring participation of several elements involved in the process. Differing from radical stylisticians, they specify these elements. ESL proposes a “new” paradigm where the literary work is seen in the entire field of social interactions.

Deriving its framework from a constructivist theory of cognition, ESL involves epistemological, methodological, ethical, and applicational aspects which may provide theoretical support for contextualized stylistics. ESL promotes an interdisciplinary clustering of various theories. It is a metatheoretical description combining structuralism, constructivism, and reader-response theory with cognitive psychology, biology, sociology, and anthropology, among other disciplines, and maintains a strong inclination towards application.

The ESL paradigm for the theory of literature derives from a pragmatic perspective. ESL values the function of the text in the social system. Schmidt (1983c, p. 248) holds that:

...texts are no longer regarded as autonomous entities but always in relation to those actions which are necessarily performed by agents within the system of literature. As a result of this general orientation toward action, we obtain a model of literature as a social action system, which can be *structurally* defined through the causal and temporal relations between four primary action roles: the roles of producing, mediating, receiving, and post-processing those actions, objects, or events which are *considered literary* by agents according to the norms of poetics internalized by the agents.

The system of aesthetic communication then comprehends the following acts and roles:

<i>Acts</i>		<i>Roles</i>
production	→	authors, etc.
mediation	→	books, publishers, etc
reception	→	readers, etc.
post-processing	→	critics, etc.

Schmidt does not limit himself to the written text. He describes aesthetic communication in general, but for the sake of economy and focus, I am concentrating only on the written text. If we take the four functions and the four roles Schmidt proposes, we may come up with the following diagram:

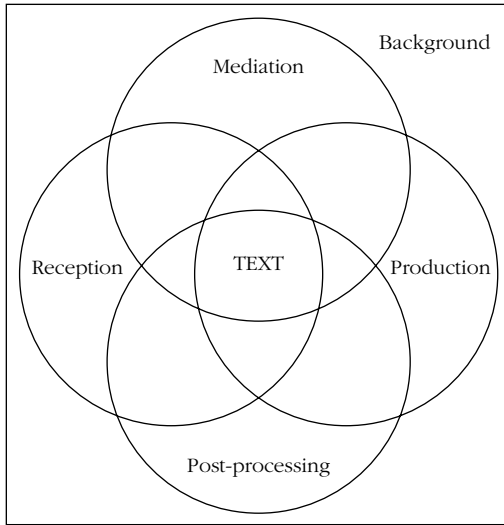


Diagram 1. Text and Actions.

According to this model, the text results from a dialogic interaction between different participants. Production, reception, mediation and post-processing are performed by different actors who influence the way the text is perceived and evaluated and bear with them their own history. Production is carried out by the writer, a cultural product who brings into the event his/her assumptions and beliefs. The reader, also a historical being, is responsible for the reception. Post-processing is the critic's job. Invested by the community with power to evaluate texts, the critic is a kind of gatekeeper who can, to a very large extent, do or undo texts and writers. Finally, mediation is a very complex function carried out by many actors, from editors and publishers to advertising companies, through, in our case, teachers, schools and educational systems. Therefore, what I propose as empirical stylistics is the study of the sociocultural implications of the choices and effects that are responsible for the creation of instancial meaning in a text, which, in its turn, results from the articulation of different sociohistorical agents.

I believe I have refuted the four major arguments against stylistics above. What I claim is that there is nothing wrong with stylistics. It is the interpretive model one adopts that will direct the choice of which features will be seen as responsible for the perception of effects and

how one contextualizes them. The much referred to metaphor of stylistics as an interface can thus be expressed in the diagram below:

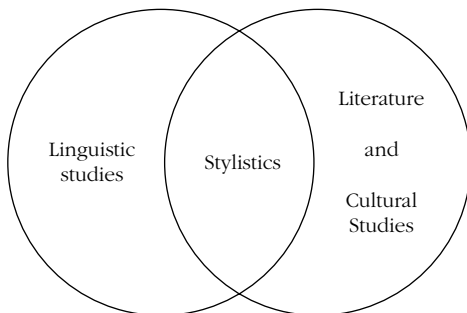


Diagram 2. Stylistics as Interface.

According to this diagram, the language model one holds or the approach to literature and cultural studies one has will affect the kind of stylistics one carries out. For instance, if we investigate a text from a pragmatic perspective, we will see interactional patterns (as, for instance, interpreting dramatic texts based on speech act theory); if we take a micro-linguistic model, we will see significant NP structures; a feminist perspective will notice ideological patterns of thought expressed through the use of, for instance, transitivity patterns or speech representation. A position based on the tenets from the Empirical Study of Literature will investigate the agents responsible for the production and processing of the text.

Therefore, the time has come for us to stop looking at stylistics as impermeable to change or to ways of reading. Stylistics –or the study of how the language of a text a certain community decides to call literary– goes hand in hand with developments in linguistics, literary and cultural theory. It is an interdisciplinary venture. I argue against a monolithic and for a pluralistic definition of stylistics.

5. STYLISTICS IN THE CLASSROOM

After travelling through this theoretical landscape, we can now arrive at the classroom. Also a product of the seventies and mainly interested in helping students develop a more systematic interpretation of texts, what has been called work in pedagogical stylistics (Carter &

Long, 1987) has tended to use literature for the teaching of language rather than to capture the relationships between the social structure and the linguistic realisations of this social structure. Collie & Slater (1987, p. 10), for instance, state that “the overall aim, then... is to let the student derive the benefits of communicative and other activities for language improvement within the context of suitable works of literature”. But there has also been more recent developments concerned with sensitising students to the use of metalanguage in literature. In this respect, it draws from developments in Language Awareness (James & Garrett, 1991) and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995) to help students verbalise the ideological implications of linguistic choices (Simpson, 1994; Wales, 1994).

6. APPLICATION

Contextualized pedagogical stylistic approaches rely on this theoretical framework when it comes to material design, text selection, teaching strategies and textual interpretation. This orientation is especially relevant to EFL students as it allows attention to form, the building of meaning from context, compensates for less shared assumptions and provides common ground for discussion and for substantiated analysis.

Let us consider Shakespeare’s “Under the Greenwood Tree” published by the British Council in association with the London Underground, the London Arts Board, The British Library and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. It is not my intention here to offer an analysis of the poem but to think of some relevant questions which may arise from a contextualized perspective. The text is part of the collection of “Poems on the Underground”, a series that began in 1986 with the objective of being posted in the London trains and has become very popular, as advertised on the leaflet that informs that the combined anthologies of these poems have sold over 190,000 copies (Benson, G. et al., 1996, p. 208).

‘Under the greenwood tree’

Under the greenwood tree
 Who loves to lie with me,
 And turn his merry note
 Unto the sweet bird’s throat,

Come hither, come hither, come hither:

Here shall he see

No enemy

But winter and rough weather.

Who doth ambition shun

And loves to live i' th' sun,

Seeking the food he eats,

And pleased with what he gets,

Come hither, come hither, come hither:

Here shall he see

No enemy

But winter and rough weather.

from AS YOU LIKE IT

If one takes a micro-linguistic approach, questions of rhyme, rhythm, parallelism, may rise (see Short, 1996, p. 124 and 166-7 for checklists on these features). Extending to discourse level, we can look at the song as a communicative act and ask who is addressing whom upon what occasion. We can also discuss the layout and how it affects the logic of “Here shall he see / No enemy / But winter and rough weather” (positive + negative + restrictive). The function of this song in *As You Like It*, questions of the relevance of music to an Elizabethan audience are also quite pertinent. These questions do not rule out asking if reading this text as a poster in the underground is different from reading it in the Oxford edition of Shakespeare’s plays or listening to it during a performance. We can also ask what the interest of the underground authorities may have been, why they have published Shakespeare’s song in a collection together with very recent poetry, what the public’s reception to this kind of enterprise is, how they are affected. All of that is part of what we call a literary experience.

7. GUIDELINES FOR A CONTEXTUALIZED APPROACH

In order to place these questions in a classroom context, I offer some theoretical guidelines to a contextually-oriented stylistics:

- To have intuitions about the meaning or effect of a particular work is not sufficient for critical purposes.
- Stylistic choices may form patterns.
- Stylistic patterns are meaningful linguistic patterns the reader perceives.

- Students must become aware that processing stylistic patterns is part of their job as a critic.
- If students become aware that there is a range of different patterns that provoke response, they may develop an awareness of patterns which may not have been discussed before.
- Learning to manipulate patterns may enhance students' perception of patterns in other texts.
- Texts are processed as discourse.
- Through stylistics, students will move from the systematic to the subliminal. The more experienced the students become, the more automatic and sophisticated will their responses be.
- A detailed examination of the language of a literary text is only one contributory aspect of literary studies. It is not an alternative but it stands as an initiating event, that is, a way into the literary experience.
- Stylistics is a methodology which takes into consideration the reader's personal and social context.

One final word: Carter (1997, p. 118) comments that "... if the 1960s was a decade of formalism in stylistics, the 1970s a decade of functionalism and the 1980s a decade of discourse stylistics, then the 1990s has become the decade in which discursively based sociohistorical and sociocultural stylistic studies are the main preoccupation". What will the new millennium bring for stylistics? We end as we started: with questions. However, it is important to stress that stylistics is proteiform and flexible enough to accommodate different cultural waves. Therefore, never ask what stylistics is or what it can do for you. Rather ask what you can do with it.

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