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The Routledge Handbook of Stylistics

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Creative writing and stylistics

Jeremy Scott

Introduction

To write is to be a linguist.

This opening statement might seem either highly debatable or downright obvious, depending on the point at which the reader is positioned along the prevailing language-literature cline. However, I make no apologies for opening a chapter on interfaces between stylistics and creative writing with this assertion. The reasons why I make it should become clear in the course of the following. To summarise as succinctly as possible: to write is to engage, inexorably, with the mechanics of language, and stylistics, in its assuming of the mantle previously drawn around the field known as poetics, is the academic discipline best suited to the study of the mechanics of language in literature. This chapter will explore a selection of the many potential interfaces between stylistics and creative writing, and will proceed from the premise that these interfaces have been underexplored to date. It is important to note at the outset that the observations which follow are intended to relate not just to the pedagogy of the two disciplines within the academy; they should also be of interest to the creative practitioners, i.e. they relate directly to the act of writing 'at the coalface'.

As a summarising justification for the approaching of creative practice through stylistics (and, ultimately, linguistics in general), it will be useful to turn to Toolan (1998, p. ix):

[One of the] chief feature[s] of stylistics is that it persists in the attempt *to understand technique, or the craft of writing*. ... Why these word-choices, clause-patterns, rhythms and intonations, contextual implications, cohesive links, choices of voice and perspective and transitivity etc. etc., and not any of the others imaginable? Conversely, can we locate the linguistic bases of some

aspects of weak writing, bad poetry, the confusing and the banal?

Stylistics asserts we should be able to, particularly by bringing to the close examination of the linguistic particularities of a text an understanding of the anatomy and functions of the language. ... Stylistics is crucially concerned with excellence of technique. [My emphasis]

Toolan's remarks are related to what he terms, in a paraphrase of Socrates, the 'examined text' – the usual application of what is often called 'the stylistics toolkit'. For our purposes I would like to substitute 'text' with 'practice', and reverse the usual paradigm. What applications might the stylistics toolkit have in the *production* of the literary text, not just in its analysis by academic critics 'post-event'? Of course, the most obvious answer to that question is: during the editorial phase of the creative process, i.e. during re-reading and rewriting. The stylistics toolkit, as Toolan suggests, can help identify and, crucially, account for moments of 'excellence' as well as parts of the work which are less successful (leaving aside for the moment the vexed question of qualitative evaluation). However, I would like to suggest that the stylistics toolkit and the insights it provides into literary process can become an integral part of creative practice itself. Stylistics also has the potential to complement and augment current creative writing pedagogy in the academy (and beyond) by providing a detailed and rigorous critical taxonomy with which to describe the key issues of both craft and readerly reception that come up for discussion time and time again in creative writing workshops. I have lost count of the number of times I have taken part in or led writing workshops, or been a part of reading groups, to find that a particular technical or reading issue comes up which participants struggle to articulate clearly. I find myself thinking, 'Stylistics has a word for this...'

A note of caution, though: it is in no way the intention of this chapter to suggest that creative practitioners *must* engage with stylistics. Such a proposition would be patently absurd. You do not need to understand stylistics to be a good writer. My hope, though, is to point to the various ways in which a practical exploration of stylistics through writing rather than just reading can benefit both the creative writer and the student of stylistics, or anyone with an interest in the mechanics of language; indeed, as the opening sentence of the chapter demonstrates, I would venture that anyone with a desire to write creatively must have, by definition, an interest in these things. Rather than showing the only way to write well, combining stylistics and creative writing provides opportunities to explore how you *can* write, how to avoid certain common pitfalls of the beginning writer, and, at the very least, to consider in depth the question posed by Toolan above: why *these* words, and not others?

Historical perspectives

The notion of approaching the act of literary writing from the perspective of its

mechanics (or craft) has a long history. I have identified here three broad areas of poetics which all to a greater or lesser extent pre-date the appearance and development of stylistics and contribute to the state of the discipline today: classical poetics and rhetoric, formalism, and narratology.

Classical poetics

The discussion of poetry and the representative arts in general which makes up much of Plato's *Republic* Books III and X is, arguably, the first theorisation of the function and purpose of literary discourse. The theme of the dialogues in Book X is representational poetry and its processes of *mimesis*: the depiction, or imitation, of reality, an activity Socrates sees as superfluous to his utopian society. It reproduces, rather than creates, and imitation is a game or sport; it is play. Plato ignores craft and focuses on inspiration, anticipating Wordsworth's Romantic ideal of the 'spontaneous overflow of emotion':

The poet is an airy thing, winged and holy, and he is not able to make poetry until he becomes inspired and goes out of his mind.

(Leitch et al. 2001, p. 35)

Crucially, in Book III Plato distinguishes between *mimesis* and *diegesis*, seeing the latter as representation of actions in the poet's own voice and the former as the representation of action in the imitated voices of characters. He uses Homer as an example, citing the opening scene of *The Iliad* where the Trojan Chryses asks Menelaus and Agamemnon to release his daughter for a ransom. The exchange is 'imitated' initially by the narrator (hence, *diegesis*) and then mimetically via the direct speech of the characters concerned. To illustrate his point even more clearly, and prefiguring one aspect of practice to be discussed in this chapter, Plato goes so far as to intervene in the text (Pope 1995) and rewrites the scene diegetically, in the voice of the authorial narrator, transposing all direct speech into indirect speech. As will be seen in a later section, this distinction between *mimesis* and *diegesis* is of great use to the writer.

Building on Plato's slightly haughty discourse on literary *mimesis* and poetic inspiration, Aristotle's *Poetics* constitutes the first rigorous categorisation of literary discourse. *Poetics* is a scientific anatomisation, just as can be found in Aristotle's work on classifications of the natural world, and as such anticipates the ambition of stylistics to provide rigorous accounts of the form of literary discourse. During the Renaissance it was treated as rulebook or manual for literary composition, and it can be seen as the first work of true literary criticism, putting down the roots which grew into neoclassicism, formalism and new criticism. Note, then, that at the dawn of the discipline we find an interest in the processes of *composition*, not textual analysis. *Poetics* is a technical manual.

Aristotle makes a distinction between objects which are 'natural' and those which are 'man-made'; for example, a tree and a chair. Poetry is made from

language as a chair is made of wood. Thus poetry, *poiēsis*, is based on the verb ‘to make’. Aristotle treats poetry as a *craft*, distinguishing himself from Plato. Alongside his well-known definition of tragedy he spends a great deal of time discussing plot and its structures, anticipating the key concerns of story narratology. Central to this, again, is mimesis; the best plots must be plausible, and imitate life (bringing to mind Henry James’s appeal for ‘solidity of specification’).

To summarise: *The Republic* and *Poetics* pre-echo the paradigm set up in the introduction to this chapter, between the way a text works (the mechanics of craft) and the way it is received in context by readers and by the culture at large (the mechanics of reading). In addition, Plato and Aristotle begin the debate which still rages in and around the subject of creative writing in the academy: is it a craft with a set of rules (or guidelines) which can be taught, or is it primarily the result of personal creativity and, dare I say it, inspiration? (For more on this see [Chapter 1](#) in this volume on rhetoric and poetics, ‘the classical heritage of stylistics’).

Russian formalism

Poetics was influential, almost two thousand years later, in the development of Russian formalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, another forerunner of both stylistics in general and of an interest in textual mechanics, with a focus on the nature of poetic language. Roman Jakobson, associated with this school, theorised a *poetic function* of language (Jakobson 1960, p. 356), defining it as discourse which highlights (or foregrounds) the linguistic form of the message. In short, poetic language calls attention to itself as ‘performance’.

The set towards the MESSAGE as such, focus on the message for its own sake, is the POETIC function of language. This function cannot be productively studied out of touch with the general problems of language, and, on the other hand, the scrutiny of language requires a thorough consideration of its poetic function. Any attempt to reduce the sphere of poetic function to poetry or to confine poetry to poetic function would be a delusive over simplification.

(1960, p. 356)

Note that Jakobson, in contrast to Aristotle and in common with modern stylistics, makes no distinction between literary discourse and ‘quotidian’ language, seeing the poetic function as an attribute of all language. As we will see in the next section, this point is of key relevance to the writer. (For more on this see [Chapter 2](#) in this volume).

Another theorist who was strongly influenced by formalism is Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin’s work has much to say which is of relevance to the creative writer. He sees discourse as ‘caught’ between speaker and listener.

The word in language is half someone else’s ... every word is directed towards

Initially narratology was associated with structuralism (due to its attempt to model the underlying patterns of narrative universally), but it has now become more ‘catholic’ in its ambitions, having applications to disciplines as diverse as psychology (e.g. the study of memory), anthropology (e.g. the evolution of folk traditions) and even philosophy (especially ethics). Narratologists such as Propp (1928), Todorov (1977), Genette (1980) and Greimas (1983) deconstructed the machinery of narrative with a view to putting together a narrative ‘grammar’ which would be as rigorous and universal as, say, accounts of syntax in linguistics. However, some modern theorists have argued that this formal grammar of narrative now seems a little ‘clunky’ and ‘unnecessarily scientific’ (van Loon 2007, p. 19).

One of the most important narratological works, and perhaps the most relevant for our purposes here, is Genette’s *Narrative Discourse: an Essay in Method* (1980). Again, it is interesting to note the use of the word ‘method’ in this context; Genette’s work has an ambition to be more than purely descriptive. Genette identified several salient features of narrative drawing on grammatical terms to classify them: order, frequency, duration, voice and mood. Three of these (at least) have great relevance to the writer.

Order concerns structure at the level of story. For example, imagine the structure of a murder mystery. First, the clues of a murder are discovered by a private investigator (call this Event A). Then, what actually happened – the circumstances of the murder – is revealed (Event B). Finally, the private investigator identifies the murderer and brings him or her to justice (Event C). Now, we can give each of these events a number corresponding to the *order* in which they are actually presented to the reader (or viewer, or listener) during the act of narration (or representation). Say the story is to be narrated chronologically (in the order that the events ‘happened’ in the story world). We could notate this as follows: B1, A2, C3. First comes the murder, then its discovery, then the revelation of the murder’s identity. However, in the ‘text’ as described above, the order is as follows: A2 (discovery), B1 (flashback), C3 (resolution). The disjunction between story (what happened) and discourse (how it is represented) is full of creative potential, heightening suspense, causing the reader to ask questions and to want to read on. It is helpful to the writer, then, to envisage a separation between narrative discourse itself and the story (or fabula) being mediated by that discourse. This is a common device, often found in film (see Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* for an extreme example).

There are other creative possibilities here. It follows from the above that there must be a discourse time and a story (or fabula) time. Genette called the relationship between these two times *duration* (1980, p. 86). ‘Twenty years passed’ is a long time in story terms, but is a short piece of discourse which takes only a second to write or read. Conversely, James Joyce’s *Ulysses* is set in a relatively short story period of one day; however, it takes a great deal longer than that to read. In short, it has a long discourse time. Again, duration can be exploited

by writers to great effect in terms of creating suspense, ironic distance, and in summarising lengthy information which is important in plot terms but need not be represented in detail by the discourse. Martin Amis's novel *Time's Arrow* (1992) famously has the discourse time and the story time running in opposition to one another.

Genette's term *voice* (1980, p. 212) is concerned with who narrates, and from what perspective. First, where the narration 'comes from': *intradiegetic* (inside the story world, as is the case with the individual pilgrims in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* or the character of Marlow in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*) or *extradiegetic* (outside the story world, as is the case with most 'standard' third-person narration). The second aspect Genette defines is whether or not the narrator functions also as a character in the story, hence *heterodiegetic* (the narrator is not a character in the story, again as is common in third-person narration) or *homodiegetic* (the narrator is also a character, as in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* or Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*). He also deals with *focalization*, describing who 'sees' particular narrative events. This may or may not be the same as who 'tells' (the narrator). For example, a heterodiegetic narrator (in the third-person) can occupy different character perspectives at different points in the story (see Simpson 2004, pp. 27–29 for an excellent illustration of this concept).

What drives narrative? What makes reading compelling? How can we as writers apply the insights of narratology to the act of creating narrative fiction (and, indeed, poetry)? As Evenson (2010) writes with reference to understanding the effect of narrative technique:

Elements and techniques are better understood not in relation to intuitive expressivist standards but in relation to their function in bringing about certain effects in the work as a whole. Intuition is not an end point but an initial response to be tested with the tools of narrative theory and the idea of means-ends relations between techniques and effects – so that we can offer clearer reasons for our intuitions or come to a new evaluation.

(p. 72)

We will be returning to the applications of narratology in more detail in the 'Suggestions for Practice' section.

Critical issues and topics

The justifications for approaching creative writing through stylistics can be divided into two principle categories, which correspond to the distinction set out at the 'dawn' of poetics by Plato and Aristotle between the latter's explicit interest in craft and Plato's in 'poetry's' effects on readers. In other words, stylistics has much of interest to say about both literary technique *and* the mechanics of reading. The majority of what follows relates to the first category; the second is ripe for

further exploration and development, as we will see.

Our brief discussion of historical perspectives on this topic brought to the fore two essential themes which bear further definition: the interaction between mimesis and diegesis and the cline between so-called ‘standard’ language and (again, so-called) ‘literary’ language. These two themes constitute the essential paradigms of this chapter. Both can be brought together under the umbrella of Carter and Nash’s (1990) description of the styles of English writing as mediums for ‘seeing through language’. The interaction between the mimetic and diegetic functions of discourse on one hand allows writers to create worlds from language, and on the other allows readers to see through language into those worlds. It will always benefit the creative writer to take account of this ineluctable fact: to be aware not only of *what* the reader is seeing but also *how* they are seeing it. The writer, in almost all cases, should be an enabler, not an obfuscator.

There is an artificiality and brittleness to the division between mimesis and diegesis as proposed by Plato, and, as Lodge (1990, p. 28) points out, it is not straightforward; neither is it a simple matter to distinguish between the two effects. Broadly, however, the terms map usefully onto the ‘showing-telling’ dichotomy beloved of the modern creative writing class, with mimesis corresponding to ‘showing’ and diegesis to ‘telling’. To recap: for Plato, diegesis is representation of action ‘in the poet’s voice’, while mimesis is representation of action in the ‘voice(s) of characters’. However, as we shall see, the taxonomy which stylistics proposes to categorise literary representation of discourse is more complex, ranging from the Narrator’s Representation of Action, pure diegesis (‘She opened the door and walked into the room, seeing him standing by the window’) to Direct Discourse, as close to a pure mimesis as written language can get (‘Here she comes’, he said). Thus, stylistics addresses Lodge’s valid objection, mapping the distinction between mimesis and diegesis, and thus between showing and telling, more rigorously. This can only be of benefit to creative practice, allowing the writer to explore the extent to which mimetic process can enter into the diegetic narrative voice, so that the writer can ‘show’ as much as possible at the expense of ‘telling’. For example, instead of ‘He lost his temper’, we prefer ‘He left the room, slamming the door behind him.’ Why? The second mediation of the story event is closer to the ‘psychic space’ of the character. There is no external voice of mysterious provenance explaining what the character is feeling on his behalf. Rather, the character’s actions ‘speak for themselves’. To be glib for a moment: actions speak louder than words. The description of a character’s behaviour leaves space for the reader to interpret it, as he or she would in the ‘real’ world, based on the everyday familiarity with the kinds of mood that slamming a door indicates (in cognitive terms, the reader has a ‘losing one’s temper’ schema which is activated by the slamming of the door). Straight diegetic description bypasses that space, enervating the reader’s visualisation of the events of the text. Rather than seeing *through* language, the reader is *looking at* the narrative voice. In short, as cognitive approaches can demonstrate (see section below), the

narrative discourse should aim for proximity to the sphere of character rather than narrator (although as always, there will be exceptions to this general rule). We can also argue here for a connection to connotative as opposed to denotative functions of discourse; mimesis corresponds to the former, while diegesis draws upon the latter.

This leads on to the second theme: the question of how (or whether) we can define literary language as having certain universal characteristics. This debate has been well-rehearsed elsewhere (a useful summary can be found in Jeffries and McIntyre (2010, pp. 61–62) and in Carter and Nash (1990, pp. 30–34)), and stylisticians have generally agreed that there is no linguistic feature which can be definitively categorised as belonging to literary language and never found elsewhere. As we have seen, however, a universal characteristic of literary language (although not, of course, exclusive to it) can be found in its function of creating worlds through mimesis and diegesis. These worlds are created through the interaction of two distinct (but inextricably linked) aspects of narrative (and I include poetry here): the discourse and the fabula. The discourse exploits mimetic and diegetic aspects of narrative discourse the more effectively to represent, or mediate, the fabula. In doing so, it sets up a second important cline which is related to the ‘ease’ with which the reader ‘sees through’ this discourse to the fabula beyond: i.e. between the transparency or otherwise of the discourse, and thus between the covertness or overtness of the narrator.

Another indicator of the position of literary discourse along the transparency-opacity cline is linguistic deviation (language that draws attention to itself by varying from the perceived norm). Carter and Nash (1990, p. 31) summarise the concept as follows:

According to deviation theory literariness or poeticality inheres in the degrees to which language use departs or deviates from expected configurations and normal patterns of language, and thus defamiliarises the reader. Language use in literature is therefore different because it makes strange, disturbs, upsets our routinized normal view of things, and thus generates new or renewed perceptions.

Carter and Nash cite Dylan Thomas’s use of the phrase ‘a grief ago’ as an example of this; it departs from normal semantic selection restrictions, with the result that grief becomes seen as process connected with time (as in the standard ‘a month ago’). They also draw attention to the ways in which this notion can help the practitioner during composition (not just in editorial analysis), prefiguring the goals of this chapter:

We have been looking at stylistics from the outside, as it were, pointing as observers to features of language, structure, contextual function and general orientation of texts. This is a useful occupation, indeed a necessary one if we are to ‘see through’ language in the dual sense, or perceiving a message with

the help of a medium and at the same time perceiving the ways in which the medium may obscure, distort or condition the message. Now, however, it is time to admit that we are not wholly and exclusively observers of texts. We are also in some measure creators of texts.

(p. 174)

To summarise: I have suggested here that it is helpful for the writer, drawing on stylistics, to picture two clines present in literary discourse: from mimesis to diegesis, and from transparency to opacity. I would like to combine the two, and propose a concept of *stylistic balance* which combines the insights of both to give concrete guidance to the creative practitioner relevant to the writing of both fiction and poetry. We will discuss and illustrate stylistic balance in more detail in the next section.

Recommendations for practice

The practical applications of these ideas are, of course, numerous, and the interested reader is referred to a forthcoming book (Scott 2013) for a much more detailed account. However, for the purposes of this overview I would like to provide some questions for further reflection and discussion, and also some concrete examples and exercises for use in creative practice. I will focus in turn on four areas: figurative language, point of view, representing speech and thought, and metaphor.

Figurative language

Stylistics furnishes us with a detailed knowledge of the workings and potentialities of language at its various levels: phoneme, morpheme, lexeme, clause, sentence, paragraph, text. It also examines the way these linguistic elements are chained together, and the way alterations in these patterns can affect meaning – including meaning which occurs above and beyond the purely semantic. In this sense, stylistics gives writers a greater understanding of the ways in which meaning becomes a product of linguistic form as well as of semantic content. The concepts of linguistic deviation and foregrounding in the effect of literary discourse on its readers (Leech 1969, p. 57, Stockwell 2002, pp. 13–26) are again key here. They draw attention to the ways in which writers can manipulate language so that its use in that instance is foregrounded against the ‘background’ of ‘standard’ usage.

There is danger lurking here too, however. As Gardner (2001, p. 127) points out:

About style, the less said the better. Nothing leads to fraudulence more quickly than the conscious pursuit of stylistic uniqueness.

Thus, the other side of the equation leads to a different problem: the dangers of

stylistic inventiveness for its own sake. Take a look at some of the writing of particularly strident stylists such as Will Self and Martin Amis, for example. Both of these writers make use of various types of deviation, including discursal, semantic and grammatical (see Amis's *Money* (1984) or Self's *How the Dead Live* (2009)), non-standard Englishes (even fabricated languages, as in the 'Mocknee' of Self's *The Book of Dave* (2007)) and unusual lexis/neologisms to creative effect. However, it could be argued that the very stridency of these narrative voices detracts from their overall effect. To return to an earlier analogy: the reader ends up staring at the voice, bewildered, rather than seeing through it. The stylistic balance is upset, and discourse takes precedence over fabula. There may well be some creative projects where this is desirable, but I would argue that they are rare; nevertheless, it is true that linguistic deviation can be a source of great poetic invention.

We should return now to the concept of stylistic balance, and our two clines: between transparency and opacity, and between mimesis and diegesis. Stylistic balance can be usefully envisaged using the metaphor of a see-saw. Style is the pivot under the plank of the see-saw; on one side is the 'story world' (the world we see through language) and on the other side is the 'discourse-world' (the world we write or read). The see-saw must compensate for emphasis on one side by lessening emphasis on the other (to mix the metaphor for a moment, the 'canvas' of a piece of imaginative writing is of a fixed size). Putting more weight on one side of the see-saw (for example, through a strident style) leads to a change in the nature of the other side (the imaginative world as 'seen' by the reader). A further question is implicit here: does emphasis on one lead to *detraction* from the other? The relationship between mimesis and diegesis is also part of stylistic balance, and thus the metaphor of the see-saw applies here too. Overemphasis on diegesis detracts from mimesis. As Aristotle argued, creative writing methodology must inevitably, respond to and/or correlate with specific visions of the world; perhaps the stylistic balance should not draw undue attention to itself (over-emphasising diegetic process?), but should focus attention on the imagined world (mimesis?). Does this apply if the emphasis is the other way round? There is a fundamental choice for the writer to make here, which stylistics can illustrate: between style that calls attention to itself, and style that calls attention to the imagined world.

There are other issues to be considered here. For the writer of fiction, does a lack of deviation correspond to narrative transparency (or narratorial covertness), and thus to mimesis? For the poet, is the presence of deviation and figurative language sufficient as a definition of 'the poetic'? Should poetic discourse always draw attention to itself? In thinking about these questions, it will be useful to revisit the concept of connotative versus denotative functions of language. Figurative language (or poetic discourse in general?) relies, surely, on the former capacity of language, and lays the ground for a richer, more textured and nuanced interaction between reader and text. Instead of following 'well-worn' paths in language, the writer can aim to 'make fresh', and thus to create expressions that

are more vivid, and more effective. When figurative language follows well-trodden paths the effect ceases to be inventive, and instead becomes denotative (or diegetic).

Practice

1. Write two stanzas of overtly ‘poetic’ poetry, putting in as many linguistically deviant features as practicable. Examine the results, concentrating on linguistic features that seem expressly ‘poetic’ in nature. Now re-write the piece, aiming to ‘smooth away’ those aspects deemed to be excessive, alongside rigorous consideration of why they should be deemed so. What happens if the poem is re-written in as ‘standard’ a discourse as possible? Further: what judgements have been brought into play to decide whether language is standard or not? How does an awareness of these judgements question the existence of a standard language?
2. Take some examples of narrative voices that you consider to be explicitly deviant (look at Amis’s *Money* or Self’s *The Book of Dave* for examples if you like). Rewrite some passages in a ‘standard’, normalised discourse. Is anything gained in terms of effectiveness? Is anything lost?
3. Consider the suggestion that the very ‘effervescence’ of some styles can divert attention away from the story world and lead to undue focus on the discourse-world. Is this more of an issue in fiction than in poetry? Is the reader more accepting of deviation in poetry than in fiction? If so, why?

Point of view

Point of view is one of the essential methodological choices that any writer makes in the act of sitting down to a new project: who tells, and (often) who sees (see [Chapter 10](#) in this volume for a more detailed account). Too often (and in literary criticism in general), the term ‘point of view’ is used as a catch-all phrase; it is beneficial to the writer to be able to identify that who *sees* what is happening in a scene may or may not be the same as who *tells* the reader what is happening. Stylistics, drawing on narratology, can help to make this distinction clearer. We can distinguish between ‘who tells/speaks’, which we can define as *point of view* (signalled, for instance, by grammatical features such as first- or third-person verbs), and ‘who sees’, defined as *focalization* (signalled by the presence of deictic language and the discernible presence of a deictic *origo*). We should draw here on Genette’s narratology to distinguish between differing types of point of view: *heterodiegetic*, *homodiegetic* and so on.

A connection can also be made between the use of the term *diegesis* to describe the ‘universe’ of the narrative, and to differentiations set out in cognitive stylistics (see Werth 1999 and Gavins 2007) between a text-world (or diegetic universe, inhabited perhaps by a homodiegetic narrator) and further sub-worlds (which may be set up, for example, by subsequent *intradiegetic* narration or by flashback). It is

very useful for the writer to envisage their narrator in relation to this universe: within it or without it, integral to the story or removed from it and so on (see [Chapter 17](#) in this volume for more on text world theory and [Chapter 11](#) for more on narratology).

Focalization can be defined as the perspective from which the diegetic universe (or text world) is perceived at any given moment of the narrative; this may or may not be the same as the point of view, and may or may not vary throughout the progress of the narrative (i.e. *fixed focalization* versus *variable focalization*). The aim is to define the wide range of options available to the writer and the creative possibilities and tensions which can be exploited.

Practice

1. These exercises are based on textual intervention, or creative re-writing. Choose a short extract from either Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day* or Carol Ann Duffy's poem cycle *The World's Wife* (depending on your interest and/or intended focus) and rewrite it from a heterodiegetic perspective. Now examine what you have written and consider the interrelationships between style and representational process. What grammatical and syntactical changes are necessitated? What is lost (in expressive terms, and in terms of the reader's experience of the narrative) and what is gained? How is it possible to transform a character idiolect into a narrative voice?
2. Re-write either the famous 'brown stocking' scene (as discussed by Auerbach 2003) from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1977, p. 78), which makes use of multiple focalizations, from Mr Ramsay's point of view only, either in homodiegetic or heterodiegetic form, or Susan Howe's poem 'The Liberties', which also makes use of different focalizations and points of view. Consider the same questions, with a view to contrasting the expressive potentialities of limited perspective versus 'omniscient' ways of seeing, with reference, again, to the tension between mimesis and diegesis.

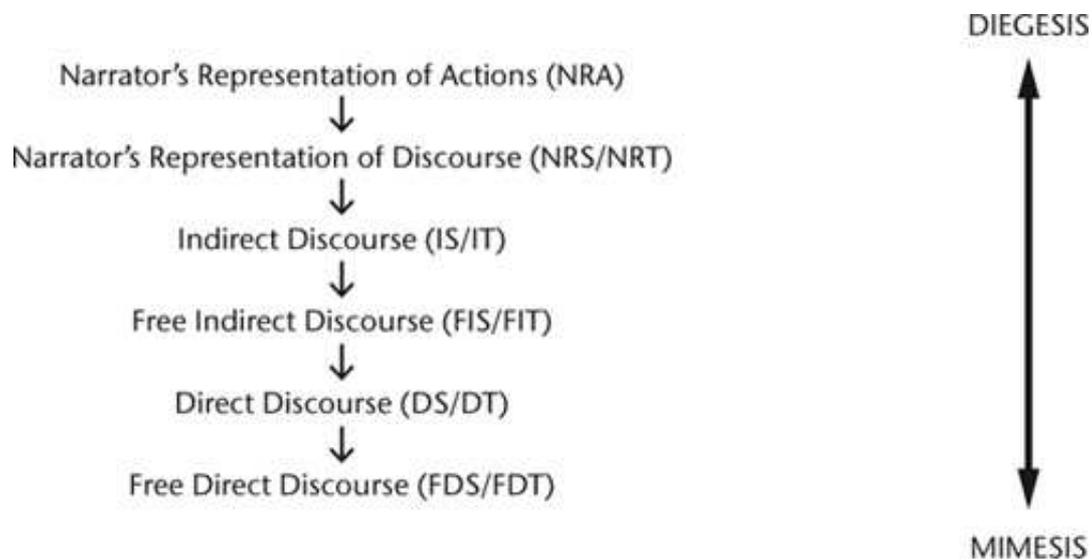
Representing speech and thought

Speech and thought presentation is a broad complex area, and it is beyond the scope of this overview to consider it in the detail it deserves (see [Chapter 13](#) in this volume for a more detailed account). There are various methods available to the writer for representing the speech and thought of characters and narrators, and stylistics has evolved a useful and relatively precise taxonomy to describe them (Short 2007). It is important, however, to consider too the extent to which and by what method spoken discourse and internal discourse can be 'simulated' through written language. Interesting technical responses to this question can be found in novels such as Graham Swift's *Last Orders* (1996) and James Kelman's *How Late It Was, How Late* (1994) and in the demotic poetry of Patience Agbabi, Moqpai Selassie and Sue Brown, all of whom attempt to represent both the voices of

characters and narrators through a textual representation of the oral demotic – in Kelman’s case, at times, phonetically. The issue of how the sound, intonation and ‘texture’ of, say, a local dialect or the authentic idiolect can be best represented is also a central issue (Scott 2009).

Kelman’s novel illustrates an interesting resolution of a common fictional dilemma: the ways in which an author’s voice will often have a tendency to ride roughshod over those of his or her characters (‘literary’ language versus the demotic). Kelman evolves a technique whereby the heterodiegetic narrator and the protagonist speak on the same level, and in the same voice (Scott 2009, pp. 92–94). These techniques shed further light on stylistic balance: the tension between the sometimes-competing demands of mimesis and diegesis, and between ‘literary’ and ‘non-literary’ discourses.

The following terms are important (Short 2007): *free direct discourse*, *direct discourse*, *free indirect discourse*, *indirect discourse*, *narrator’s representation of speech/thought* and *narrator’s representation of action* (see [Figure 26.1](#)). The writer should pay attention to the way in which the ‘tug of war’ between narrator and character, between diegesis and mimesis, shifts along the cline (with discourse under control of *character* at the start – in free direct discourse – and under the control of the *narrator* at the end).



[Figure 26.1](#) Representing speech and thought

Perhaps the most intriguing of these methods occurs at the mid-point along the cline: free indirect discourse (FID) allows the voices of character and narrator to coexist simultaneously. In FID the narrative discourse gains an enlivening flexibility; the character is allowed to ‘own’ the words at times, but the limitations of a pure homodiegetic perspective are avoided (Rimmon-Kenan 1983 pp. 109–110, Bray 2007). Crucially, the reader can engage with the story via both the

narrator's *and* the character's discourse, with, as it were, a dual empathy.

It is also interesting to consider the complex issue of the extent to which 'thought' corresponds to language, as exploited in stream-of-consciousness writing and internal monologue (a technique very much in vogue in High Modernist works such as Virginia's Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and in Joyce's *Ulysses*). It could be argued that the experiments of the modernists (and others) in representing thought to some extent led them up a methodological blind alley (Scott 2009, p. 32). The writer would be well advised to see representations of speech and thought as *simulations*, not as attempts at transcript; they should aim to capture the 'flavour' of real discourse, not its full content.

Practice

1. The following exercise explores the workings of dialogue by re-writing direct speech as indirect speech and vice versa. You should focus on *showing* the manner of speech rather than describing it (preferring mimesis over diegesis), and avoid using any narrator's representation of action whatsoever. Convert the following from indirect speech to free direct speech:
 - a. The driver addressed me abruptly, asking if I was from Kent.
 - b. David queried the meaning of the word 'discourse'.
 - c. As he opened the door, he told her to move over.
 - d. Roughly, Carl said she should stop being so stupid.Convert the following from direct speech to indirect.
 - a. "So he says," Mrs Peters gossiped, "'Annie wouldn't have done that,' he says, so I says, 'Blast, and she would.' And so she would."
 - b. He insisted on putting the car into the barn for me, so I got out and directed him into the narrow space.Which representation works best in each case? Why?
2. Take a section of *The Canterbury Tales* (the opening of 'The Pardoner's Tale', for example) and rewrite it in a modern English demotic (drawing on your own background for the language). What stylistic changes are necessitated? What happens when the poem is read aloud by the author rather than read 'silently'? What is lost in the transition from oral to written, and vice versa? What is gained?
3. Think about the difference between these five representations in terms of the 'distance' between narrator and character. Why include these examples in a section on speech and thought representation?
 - a. It was the winter of the year 1953. A large man stepped out of a doorway.
 - b. Henry Warburton had never cared much for snowstorms.
 - c. Henry hated snowstorms.
 - d. God how he hated these damn snowstorms.
 - e. Snow. Under your collar, down inside your shoes, freezing and plugging up your miserable soul...

Metaphor

One of the great contributions of stylistics to the practice of literature is in its rigorous deconstruction of the function and effect of metaphor, and here I mean ‘metaphor’ in its broadest sense, embracing metonymy, synecdoche and simile (see [Chapter 12](#) in this volume for a more detailed account). It is important to grasp how fundamental metaphor is to communication, as Jakobson (1960) demonstrated. Mark Haddon’s novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2004) is a wonderful exploration of this concept. The narrator of this novel, Christopher, suffers from a form of Asperger’s Syndrome which means that he cannot process or understand metaphorical constructions; for him, ‘skeletons in cupboards’ are not secrets, but hidden corpses. For Christopher, metaphors are just ‘lies’.

Investigations within cognitive linguistics and psychology generally have proposed models for the function of metaphor, and introduced terminology such as *grounds*, *target* and *source* (or variations on these) to illustrate the ways in which meaning is ‘carried over’ from one term to another (from ‘rose’ to ‘love’, say, with ‘rose’ as source, ‘love’ as target, and the grounds being, for instance, the intense colour of the rose, its propensity to hide thorns, the fact that it is mutable and impermanent yet beautiful, and so on), in the process combining two senses to produce a third, distinct (in the best examples, unique) sense (Lakoff and Johnson 1981, Steen 1994). More recently, applications of blending theory (see [Chapter 18](#) in this volume) have come up with exciting new ways of understanding the function of metaphor as a blending of two conceptual spaces in the mind of the reader (Fauconnier and Turner 2002). An understanding of these concepts allows the writer to pinpoint and develop effective metaphor and to understand the ways they work on the reader, and also to avoid some of the common problems of metaphor writing: the mixed, or incompatible, metaphor and the danger of cliché.

The central idea to grasp is the way in which sophisticated use of metaphor leads to a more active process of world building in the mind of the reader by virtue of the fact that the process of semantic cognition ‘travels further’ in the act of arriving at interpretation. By forcing the reader’s mind to arrive at meaning via new routes (for example, in the transfer of meaning from target to source, from ‘rose’ to ‘love’), a text will prove more stimulating, and the reading experience become more vivid. Understanding this process has a role to play, like that of figurative language, in the avoidance of cliché (interestingly, ‘rose’ as ‘love’ is now a cliché), where the reading brain trundles along frequently-travelled routes. Also intriguing in this connection is Lakoff and Johnson’s (1981) anatomisation of different types of archetypal metaphor, which are seen to be integral and paradigmatic to the human mind’s methods of interfacing with the world, for example: *purposes are destinations*, *states are locations*, *time moves*, *life is a journey*, *death is sleep* and so on. Are these archetypes by necessity the building blocks of all metaphor, or are there ways of forging new connections between targets and sources?

Practice

1. Write metaphors from the following prompts: ‘Your eyes are...’ ‘I cried...’, ‘Love is...’, ‘That autumn was...’, ‘The journey was...’. The challenge is to avoid cliché at all costs. Once you’ve done this, add another line, making sure that the metaphor isn’t mixed (i.e. that your two sources come from the same conceptual domain; a rose and a garden, say, in a metaphor about love). You should then aim to refine and distil the results so that the metaphor is one line long, thinking again about the interaction of diegesis and mimesis.
2. Think of a hobby or pastime that you are familiar with (e.g. photography, playing or watching sports, video gaming, etc.). Use the lexical field associated with that hobby to create an extended metaphor from prompt nouns taken from Lakoff above. ‘Love’ combined with ‘football’? ‘Time’ with ‘role playing games’? ‘Death’ with ‘graffiti art’? The more disparate the two, the more interesting the exercise. Is it true to say that the more disparate the target and source, the more effective the expressive results? If so, why?

Future directions

Three different strands for further research, investigation and development have emerged during the course of my work on this topic. The first can be found in the relationship, referred to on a number of occasions throughout this chapter but not yet explored in the detail it deserves, of creative practice to cognitive poetics, especially in terms of the latter’s interest in the processes of reading. Cognitive poetics draws on both cognitive linguistics and ‘traditional’ poetics, and its ambition is to provide a rigorous account of the mechanics of reading (see [Chapter 19](#) in this volume for more on this). The field makes use of cognitive concepts such as Gestalt psychology (figures and grounds) and schema theory to develop rigorous models of what happens when we read literary texts (Stockwell 2002, Gavins and Steen 2005). One of the most useful and relevant branches of cognitive poetics in terms of creative practice is text-world theory (Werth 1999, Gavins 2007). In its delineation of the various conceptual spaces which a reader creates as he or she engages with a literary text as well as the myriad ways in which these spaces (text-worlds) interact, text-world theory gives the writer the tools to devise an invaluable conceptual map, depicting both the ways in which his or her text might be read (or, more precisely, *imagined and envisaged*) and, from the point of view of craft, the position of a narrative or poetic voice in relation to this text-world: within it or without it, integral to the story or removed from it and so on, thus keeping the writer attuned to the epistemological status of that voice. This status will impact upon the kinds of knowledge a character/narrator will/will not (or should/should not) have access to and, crucially, the kinds of *language* that he or she will or will not have access to.

A second area deserving of further exploration is that of the text in performance. Plenty of work has been done on the stylistics of play texts (see also [Chapter 15](#) in

this volume), especially on how they create character (Culpeper 2001) and in terms of the use of pragmatics-based frameworks to analyse dialogue (Short 1996), but little from the perspective of the playwright. To what extent could an understanding of pragmatics (for example, politeness frameworks and conversational maxims) aid and inform the writing of authentic-sounding dialogue, rather than just its analysis? Also of potential relevance here are the ways in which modern stylistics, and, indeed, studies of linguistic creativity in general, are embracing analysis of non-textual media, for example film, TV, plays and poetry in performance (Swann *et al.* 2011). This could certainly inform creative practice, for example in devised approaches to theatre and in other forms of improvisation, such as informed the writing of Patience Agbabi's performance poem 'Word' (see Swann *et al.* 2010, pp. 36–37).

Thirdly, and perhaps most speculatively, it would be interesting to investigate what stylistics, especially its cognitive branches, has to say about the process of 'poetic inspiration' (returning once more to Plato's side of the equation) – or perhaps, to put it less contentiously, about the relationships between language and creativity. It has long been my ambition to inculcate stylistic awareness into creative practice, not as a post-composition editorial facility but as part of the process of writing. The most promising route for this investigation would appear to be through research into language and creativity. One example can be found in the process referred to by Keith Oatley (Gavins and Steen 2005, p. 161) as *writingandreading*. When reading a text, we perform it, and thus we mentally 'write' it. In what ways can this experience of writingandreading be mined for insights into the processes involved in creating texts? Another avenue of enquiry lies in looking at creativity as arising from within language, not from external sources; in other words, from the act of writing itself. As Carter and Nash (1990, p. 176) make clear, a lot can be learned about the relationships between language and creativity through writing games, wherein language itself provides the creative stimulus which might normally be expected to come from an extra-linguistic source (as it were, from the fabula rather than the discourse). Creativeness, it must be agreed, is directly accessible *through* language, and thus to everyone.

Creativity is a pervasive feature of spoken language exchanges as well as a key component in interpersonal communication, and ... it is a property actively possessed by all speakers and listeners; it is not simply the domain of a few creatively gifted individuals.

(Carter 2004, p. 6)

This chapter can only ever be a cursory overview of the subject, and thus there is an ever-present danger of a lack of depth and, indeed, a certain oversimplification, especially for the scholar approaching the topic from an interest in stylistics as an academic discipline rather than in creative writing *per se*. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the series of ideas and suggestions for practice here

could be useful ways of exploring stylistics from a different ‘angle’ (from that of producing our own texts rather than analysing those written by others) and as a springboard for a different kind of appreciation of certain aspects of the stylistics toolkit.

For the creative practitioner, it is hoped that this stylistic toolkit could form the basis of a heightened critical awareness of the mechanics of literary discourse, most obviously during the editorial phase of the writing process (and during re-writing), but also during the act of writing itself. Thus, stylistics stands as a means of exemplifying the two persons of the writer as defined, famously, by Dorothea Brande:

Think of yourself as two-persons-in-one. There will be a prosaic, everyday, practical person to bear the brunt of the day’s encounters. It will have plenty of virtues to offset its stolidity; it must learn to be intelligently critical, detached, tolerant, while at the same time remembering that its first function is to provide suitable conditions for the artist self. The other half of your dual nature may then be as sensitive, enthusiastic, and partisan as you like; only it will not drag those traits out into the workaday world.

(1983, pp. 48–49)

Indeed, considerations of craft are becoming more and more a feature of creative writing teaching across the academy, and stylistics seems ideally placed to provide a workable critical taxonomy for describing the various aspects of craft in all their glorious complexity. Once again: this is not to suggest that we can talk about a ‘right way to write’; however, it is surely reasonable to offer up a series of precepts and themes to act as a bowstring against which the individual creative voice can pull.

Related topics

Cognitive poetics, drama and performance, linguistic levels of foregrounding, metaphor and metonymy, narrative fiction, point of view and modality, real readers, rhetoric and poetics, speech and thought presentation, text world theory.

Further reading

Boulter, A., 2007. *Writing fiction: Creative and critical approaches*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

A discussion of creative writing from the perspective of critical literary theory.

Carter, R. and Nash, W., 1990. *Seeing through language: A guide to styles of English writing*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

An overview of style from the perspective of creativity.

