Overview

Stylistics is the study of language in literature. It seeks to account for the interpretative effects of a text through close study of its linguistic detail, such as syntactic structuring, semantic deviation, deixis, modality, etc., often working through inferred interpretative cohesion of foregrounded features. Stylistics uses models and approaches from various fields in linguistics to help draw out how a specific arrangement of linguistic motifs and structures facilitates and generates certain aesthetic and hermeneutic effects, to analyse the functioning of textual features as triggers for and constraints upon interpretation. The term stylistics is also sometimes used to describe critically reflexive development of linguistic tools through literary application (this usually being called linguistic stylistics), or the use of linguistic tools to analyse literary or poetic features (e.g. metaphor) within naturally occurring language and non-fictional texts (e.g. conversations, advertisements, political speeches). In this respect, stylistics very much perceives the literariness of language as scalar rather than binary (e.g. literary vs. non-literary language and texts).

Stylistics can be traced back to aspects of classic rhetoric in its concern with dispositio (arrangement), and elocutio (style), and ethos and pathos (the audience’s perception of the moral character of the speaker, and the audience’s emotions as aroused by the affective power of the speech, respectively, the ‘speaker’ function in literary contexts being performed by narrators and characters more than authors directly). The lineage of contemporary Stylistics, however, is more markedly twentieth century, descending from the evolutions in approaches to language in literature within Structuralism, Russian Formalism, Prague School Functionalism, through Practical and New Criticism, and on through Reader Response Theory. Equally influential, though, are parallel advances from structuralist to poststructuralist notions of meaning and communication within linguistics, such as the move from descriptive grammars like Chomsky’s generative grammar (which sought to define the ‘deep’ and ‘surface’ structures of all grammatical sentences) to Halliday’s functional grammar (which emphasised the pragmatic dimensions of language in its communicative context). Contemporary stylistics is most directly influenced by late twentieth century discourse pragmatic-oriented developments in sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and discourse analysis (the study of the interpersonal, transactional, context-bound aspects of communication between addresser and addressee).

Stylistics selectively adopts, adapts and appropriates a range of concepts and models from philosophical, practical and socio-linguistics to investigate the interpretative impact of various linguistic features employed within literature. A few of the features sometimes focussed upon are accommodated within traditional literary study, such as literary linguistic means of deviation and foregrounding (for example, sound patterning through assonance and alliteration, lexical deviation such as neologisms, semantic deviation in the form of metaphors, etc.), due to the common theoretical ancestry of many literary critical approaches in Formalism and Functionalism. Many other features
attended to by stylistics, however, can only be accounted for and analysed using linguistic concepts and models. For example, acute analysis of the inference and interpretation of subtexts within conversations between characters requires use of models of the functions of features of naturally occurring conversation drawn from pragmatics. The aim of stylistics is to provide a less subjective, more principled and retrievable account of the interpretative effects of literary texts through a more textually sensitive, systematic and socio-linguistically informed analysis of their linguistic features.

Just as it has many roots, contemporary stylistics has many branches, of which cognitive poetics is perhaps the most radical. Cognitive poetics has evolved as part of the late twentieth century 'cognitive turn'. Research within the fields of *cognitive linguistics, artificial intelligence, and psycholinguistics has, since the 1970s, been providing empirically-based models of the perceptual categories and mental structures employed by the embodied human mind in the act of processing language. These models have been appropriated within cognitive poetics to explore the mental processes behind interpretation of stylistic features. Cognitive poetics goes beyond stylistic accounting for literary interpretation via linguistic models to investigate the commonalities and idiosyncrasies in reading experiences based on cognitive scientific insights into the relationships between the mind, language and the world.

Key terms: *cohesion; *deviation; *defamiliarisation; *discourse analysis; drama; *foregrounding; *form and *function; *inference; LANGUAGE; LITERATURE; narrative; *poetics; *pragmatics; RHETORIC; *stylistics; versification

Major figures and models

The following is a brief survey of a small selection of the linguistic and cognitive linguistic concepts and models which are most prominent within stylistics and cognitive poetics.

Foregrounding, Deviation and Parallelism

The FORMALIST and FUNCTIONALIST notion of *foregrounding, itself informed by early twentieth century gestalt psychology, is perceived by many stylisticians to be the dominant means of readerly *inference of interpretative significance. Foregrounding in literature is created through the creation and exploitation of patterns and systems within language use, and perceived deviation from those patterns. Parallels can be constructed through patterning and repetition of structures (as in rhyme schemes and repeated syntactic positioning), prompting the reader to seek semantic associations and interpretative links between the paralleled features. The patterns appealed to can be external to the text itself, e.g. conventional syntactic structures, standard lexical constructions, use of capitalisation, or internal to the text, such as a poem’s metrical scheme, the lexical field of an extract of fiction, or its mode of narration (e.g. third
person, retrospective, non-intrusive, omniscient). Patterns, and deviations from patterns, can occur at all linguistic levels (the level of *discourse, *syntax, *semantics, *graphology, *lexis, *morphology, or *phonetics). The Stylistic approach hypothesises that readers will generally seek an interpretative connection between foregrounded features, guided by an assumption of authorial intention.

Literary Point of View: Deixis, Modality and Transitivity

*Deictic language (pronouns, demonstratives, spatial and temporal adverbs, and the like, the meaning of which is dependent on the context of use), plays a significant part in the construction of the locations, points of view, and interrelations between narrators, characters and narratees within scenes and within and across diegetic levels of literature. The role of *modality, expressed through modal auxiliary *verbs (expressing duty, desire, and belief), in the communication of narratorial and character point of view has also been fruitfully investigated by stylisticians. *Transitivity analysis explores the structures and functions of processes (expressed through verbs) within clauses, stylistic analysis of which likewise gives insight into the strategic portrayal of acts, agents, character behaviour, etc.

Literary Pragmatics: Conversation Analysis, Speech Acts, Politeness, Conversational Implicature, and Speech and Thought Presentation

*Pragmatics is concerned with the meaning of an utterance in relation to its context. Various models of communication are offered under this umbrella term. Conversation Analysis investigates turn-taking, topic-control, and non-fluency features (interruptions, false starts and the like), while study of *Speech Acts explores the relationships between propositional structures, intended and perceived meaning, and effect. Politeness can be probed through observation of covert and overt threats to negative and positive face. Stylistic analysis of literary representations of character dialogue (e.g. within novels and drama) using these concepts and models can account for the ways in which *inferences are evoked regarding the relationships between characters (in terms of power, intimacy, etc.,) and the contribution of such conversations to characterisation. Conversational implicature – the communication of meaning through the adherence to and flouting of conversational maxims in accordance with an overarching assumption of communicative co-operation (the *cooperative principle) – can be analysed to reveal inferable assumptions, presuppositions and subtext within character interactions, as well as within author-reader communication. Lastly, the representation of characters’ speech and thought (e.g. *direct, indirect and free indirect speech and thought represented through variations in use of reporting clauses, speech marks, different degrees of narratorial mediation of thought, marked by first and third person reference, for example) can be analysed to explicate different aspects of characterisation (including characterisation of the narrator).
Figure and Ground, Schema, and Conceptual Metaphors

Figure and Ground relations are the embodied mind’s way of perceiving foregrounding and deviation. In exploring foregrounding, cognitive poetics identifies the set characteristics of a figure (textual or abstract) which enable it to be perceived as such and distinguished from a ground, and enable attention to be attracted to the former. Schema Theory offers a model of the means by which the mind organises and efficiently recalls, utilises, and adapts packages of knowledge (schemas) based on dynamic experience. Cognitive poetics explores how such schemas can be linguistically evoked and reinforced or refreshed by literary experiences. Conceptual Metaphor Theory, on the other hand, analyses the text-driven selective mapping of properties of source and target domains evoked by metaphorical linguistic constructions, and, on the basis of re-occurring conceptual metaphors, investigates the underlying intercultural cognitive models that may determine the nature of and paradigmatic relationships between certain concrete and abstract concepts.

Deictic Shifting and Text Worlds

Deictic Shift Theory and Text World Theory explore higher linguistic levels to map out the ways in which the reading mind processes deixis, and the ways in which it maps out, conceptually navigates, and keeps track of the various discourse levels within literature. Deictic Shift Theory asserts that in order to comprehend deictic cues the reader has to conceptually project to the deictic centre of the speaker (e.g., a narrator or character), and argues that the processing of deictic language plays a significant part in the sense of immersion and transportation so often anecdotally reported of the experience of reading literature. Text World Theory traces the ways in which a literary text distinguishes different levels of the story (i.e., the discourse world, the text world and various potential types of subworlds), their properties (e.g., participants, location), and the processes that take place within them (e.g., events, thoughts).

How to practise Stylistics and Cognitive Poetics...

Most stylistic analyses will either focus on one specific linguistic feature or model, or be of the ‘eclectic’ kind, probing a range of features, according to what the reader feels is most interpretatively significant within a particular text. Begin by reading through the text, and note down your initial interpretative impressions. Then, try to account for your interpretation through analysis of the linguistic features of the text, by considering the following questions:

- What deviation occurs in the text? Is it internal or external? At what linguistic level does it occur? Are there any parallelisms, and at what level do they occur? How do these foregrounded features work individually and together to influence your interpretation?
• How do deixis, modality and transitivity contribute to your conceptual construction and interpretative impressions of the fictional world of the story, its characters and their interrelations?

• What aspects of literary pragmatics are at play, and how do they affect your interpretation of characters and their relationships?

• What other linguistic features of the text do you notice, and how do they shape your reading of the text?

Use the insights gained to augment and systematically account for your interpretation. Then, consider, which of the four linguistic foci was most useful in this account?

To move into cognitive poetic analysis, you could consider

• What figure and ground relations underlie any foregrounding effects in the text?

• What schema are evoked by the text, and in what ways are they affirmed or refreshed? How is your interpretation shaped by the use of schema in the text?

• What conceptual metaphors are employed, if any, and what properties of each domain are mapped into the newly blended concept by each particular linguistic construction of a metaphor?

• What kinds of deictic shifting are required by the deictic language of the text, and what effect does this have on your interpretation of the text?

• How many and what kind of subworlds are involved in the text, and how does your navigation of them influence your interpretation?

Example

Read ‘Sonny’s Lettah’, by Linton Kwesi Johnson (available on this website @ 5.2.1b). Do this in the first instance without reading the accompanying notes. Sketch out an initial interpretation, and go on to explore that interpretation through (selective or comprehensive) application of the above questions and suggestions. Then, compare your responses to those below.
‘Sonny’s Lettah’ is a protest poem written in response to the metropolitan police’s racially prejudice exploitation of the Thatcherite reintroduction of the 1824 Vagrancy Act, known as the ‘sus’ law, enabling police to stop and search anyone merely on grounds of suspicion. Public perception of this racially prejudice misuse is believed to have contributed significantly to the Brixton riots of 1981. The poem is written in the Jamaican creole dialect, creating a culturally distinct voice which could be both alienating and engaging in its deviation from lexical norms and its internal consistency. Written in *epistolatory form, the poem gives the reader a sense of overhearing a personal confession from son to mother. The protagonist’s attitude towards his crime is seems ambivalent, seemingly still shocked by having killed a policeman, but more ashamed of having broken his promise to his mother to protect his brother. He seems foremost sincerely apologetic for the strain his imprisonment will put upon his mother, and genuinely caring for his brother. Furthermore, the narrative is told in such a way as to emphasise the pace and injustice of the events, and so the reader is able to empathise with the speaker’s feelings and choices, and sympathise with his fate.

A range of features seem to contribute to these impressions: this analysis will address those foregrounded through deviation and parallelism, and their effects.

The most striking aspect of this poem is its (external) deviation from standard British English spelling in partially phonetic representation of Jamaican patois. The poet has employed letters and morphemes more directly resembling the speech sounds of the creole, creating words such as ‘miggle’ for ‘middle’ (l.20), and ‘likkle’ for ‘little’ (l.19), altering central consonants, shifting each to sounds articulated further back in the mouth than the dental plosives of the ‘standard’ pronunciation. This distinctly locates the speaker within a particular minority cultural group, and marks an appropriation of and adaptation to British culture, in the blending of accents and dialects.

The register of the poem deviates from both the formal expression with which the letter opens and closes, and the degree of familiarity that might be expected between mother and son. Through this the poet indicates a patent respect on behalf of the son for his mother, but affection also. It is also suggestive of an attempted impression of good literacy, undermined by the stilted nature of the expression of his greeting, imbued by the capitalisation of ‘Day’, lending both words of line 6 stress, and by the line breaks.

The patterning and deviation within line lengths contribute to the poem in other ways. The three eight-line central stanzas conveying the main action of the event are formed in alternating lines of iambic pentameter and catalectic anapaestic lines (albeit of varying length and feet). The tight rhyme scheme, predominantly monosyllabic lexical units and lack of punctuation keep the pace fast, echoing the pace of the action, conveying an impression of the speaker’s felt immediacy to it in the act of remembering. This is brought to a highly contrasting slow, and then a seeming halt, with the stanza of two lines, ‘an crash / an dead’, each single iamb left to resonate in the ensuing brief silences. Their metrical brevity is aided and emphasised by their grammatical deviation, ‘an crash’ contracting something possibly along the lines of ‘and there was a crash’, which the reader is left to fill in, and ‘an dead’, eliding ‘he was’, foregrounding the shock and horror of death itself more than the identity of the killed policeman.
Line lengths and grammatical deviation function, too, within enjambment, in lines such as ‘I remain / your son / Sonny’. The line ‘I remain’ possesses ‘double syntax’ in that it is meaningful on its own (as in ‘I remain’, I am still alive, at least, and in contrast to the policeman) and through revision with the continuation ‘your son’, associating ‘Sonny’s’ continued life and identity with his role as his mother’s son. This is affirmed in the ending on his name with the short trochaic line ‘Sonny’.

The name ‘Sonny’, being slang for the address ‘son’, casts the protagonist as akin to many other men, and thus many potential readers, suggesting each could easily be in his place if things were different. The deictic pronouns ‘I’ and ‘yu’ (‘you’) have a similar effect, being slippery referents, open to all takers. The term of address ‘mama’ is non-specific too, and could fit many readers. It marks, in British English, a childlike relationship, suggestive of a baby’s first words or pleading for attention, both re-evoking the reader’s sympathy for the protagonist, and affirming the centrality of this bond to his identity.

The medium of a letter within a poem deviates in some ways from both forms, but is effective in facilitating a sense of physical distance and emotional closeness, and the impression of the speaker’s isolation, along with foregrounding the nature of the communicational context. The letter is penned alone and sent out in hope of it being received. The poet’s simultaneous abidance by many conventions of literary versification mark it as a poem, and thus to be communicated to many, its impact as a protest dependent on it being heard.

In conclusion, while this stylistic analysis is in no way comprehensive, it does illustrate some of the ways in which deviation and parallelism at various linguistic levels function to foreground particular aspects of the poem, with the overarching effect of evoking sympathy for the speaker’s situation, and emphasising the shared, familial and human nature of his identity and behaviour, despite society’s alienation.

Activities

(a) Draw on the above ‘How to practise Stylistics and Cognitive Poetics’ guidelines to help frame a stylistic analysis of a literary text that interests you. If possible, find a literary critical response to the same text and compare your analyses.

(b) Use the guidelines to help frame a further stylistic and cognitive analysis of an advertisement in a magazine, a poster, or any other text in a public space (e.g. Clarins 5.4.4; street texts, 5.2.6). Consider the insights this facilitates.

Discussion

(i) a principled analysis of language can be used to make our commentary on the effects produced in literary work less impressionistic and subjective.

Carter (1982: 5-6)
(ii) one does not need to know linguistics in order to read and understand literary works

Traugott and Pratt (1980:19-20)

Also see: PRACTICAL CRITICISM AND NEW (OLD) CRITICISM; FORMALISM INTO FUNCTIONALISM, and Part Two.


Anthologies: Carter and Stockwell 2008*; McIntyre and Busse 2010*.

*Bibliographic references further to those in the book

Here are some relevant web sites:

‘A Brief History of Stylistics’
http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/projects/stylistics/introduction/history.htm

*Traité de stylistique française*, by C. Bally (1909), e-book available at
http://www.archive.org/details/traitdestylist01ball

https://www2.bc.edu/~richarad/lcb/fea/tsur/cogpoetics.html