THE LANGUAGE OF THE AGE

DAVID CRYSTAL

University of Reading (Reading, England)

It is standard practice in literary stylistics to see literary language operating against the backdrop of the language as a whole. An author is supposed to "master the rules of grammar before he attempts to bend or break them" (Robert Graves), and the same recommendation has been made for those who attempt to explicate authors' intentions and abilities in this respect. Taking this injunction literally, of course, means that one would never make any progress in literary study, because the intellectual mastery of the rules of a language is a full-time, life-time task – as is well illustrated by **Investigating English Style** (Crystal and Davy 1969), which was originally intended to be a study of literary language, but which ended up wholly devoted to an account of (some aspects of (some samples of (some of))) the varieties of language upon which the language of literature draws. But how, then, to make sense of such pervasive notions as "literary language" and "the language as a whole"?

It is quite usual to apply Graves' injunction in stylistic analysis, as is evident from the proliferation of notions which have tried to capture the essence of what is involved ("foregrounding", "deviance", "marking", etc.). But we do not as a consequence seem to be any nearer to clarifying the relationship between literary and non-literary language. One reason may well be the different metalanguages and discovery procedures of the two domains. It is somewhat ironic that the linguistic investigation of literary language should have inspired a tradition of study which is hardly ever used for the study of language in general. Conversation and other varieties of spoken and written language are capable of description in terms of foregrounding, stylistic deviance, figurative language and marked rhythmical patterns, too – yet linguists are curiously reluctant to use notions such as these in their general work. But without common linguistic models being routinely applied to the literary and non-literary domains, how can the precise relationship between the two be described?

A second source of difficulty relates to the characteristics of particular stylistic approaches. The "bottom up" analysis of texts, in which specific pat-

terns of sound, grammar or lexicon are subjected to microanalytic scrutiny, may help to clarify individual stylistic effects, or define an author's linguistic identity, but the gap between this level of enquiry and that presupposed in discussions of "literary language", "the language of poetry", and the like, remains dispiritingly vast. Nor is there any less of a gap if one approaches stylistic study from the "top down", through the use of the techniques of discourse or text analysis to investigate whole works. The thematic structure of a work may be displayed (elegantly or obscurely) using such approaches, but again, we are no nearer to understanding what, if anything, is meant by phrases such as "the language of the modern novel", or claims such as "the language of the age is never the language of poetry" (Thomas Gray).

Can this gap be bridged? Is it possible to make a genuine connection between the specific concerns of linguistic stylistic study, on the one hand, and the general observations about the "language of literature" and the "language of the age", which have been debated by authors, critics and stylisticians for some 200 years? It might be felt that such observations are phrased so vaguely that any precise discussion is impossible. But there are some hints in the recent literature on language which may help to promote a clearer understanding of the notions involved.

Of all these notions, it is the characterisation of "language of the age" which - perhaps surprisingly, in view of the maturity of descriptive linguistic study - presents the greatest theoretical difficulty. There are several crude but well-established ways of identifying a core body of material as "literature" (notwithstanding the evaluative debate which always ensues when someone attempts to define boundaries), and the notion of literary language has thus an immediate meaningfulness, which such notions as foregrounding can help to formalise.. But there are no comparable traditions for identifying the language of the age, which remains largely uninvestigated. This notion, it must be stressed, is not to be equated with the "langue" or "competence" of a person or community. Whatever the features are that characterise the language of (say) the 1960s, these are only a sub-set of the language as a whole, identified in order to enable a contrast to be drawn with the language of (say) the 1920s, or the present day, with which there is otherwise a great deal in common. On the other hand, the notion is not to be equated with "parole", or "performance", for it is unlikely that any one individual, or act of speaking, is capable of representing all the trends which constitute an "age" - even though in retrospect one can cite instances which hint at it (Churchill's wartime speeches, for instance). The "language of the age" is somewhere in between **langue** and **parole**. The phrase suggests a level of adult linguistic currency which most people accept (usually unconsciously) as fashionable, and which they identify with, or react against, largely on grounds of taste. It is not the same as majority usage - the most commonly used spoken or written patterns which constitute the "core" of a language; only a minority in the speech community might actually use the features in question, but the majority passively recognise, assimilate, appreciate or castigate them. Doubtless there is a relevant analogy to be drawn with fashion in general - but the analogy must not be taken too far, for language has far more variables, and language change operates on a very different scale from, say, fashions in clothing. On the other hand, the definition of relevant linguistic habits would need to take into

account a similar range of factors as affects other fashions - most obviously, age, sex, occupation, regional and social background. Perhaps the contrast between the language of the age and the language of literature can be restated as a contrast between fashions in these two domains?

One way of being sure that we had begun to understand the nature of linguistic fashion would be to predict it. Can we say anything about what the linguistic fashion of the next generation will be like, on the basis of what we know about the language of today? On the face of it, this does not seem possible. Experience tells us that it is easy to recognise linguistic fashion - but only after it has arrived. Clichés and catch-phrases are cases in point. We sense them while they are alive and well, or past their prime, or on the point of death - but never at their birth. Who could ever point to a phrase and guarantee its future status as a cliché or catch-phrase? Even the experts - the advertising firms - are never certain in advance that their latest slogan will succeed. And yet, there are indications that we may be entering an age where a practicable, forward-looking investigation of linguistic fashion could be devised. Not only have techniques of data recording and analysis been introduced which make large-scale studies of linguistic trends possible, but there are clear indications that relevant data are now much more readily identifiable. A wide range of social developments currently taking place is likely to affect the nature and use of language in ways which bear directly on the issue. If these developments could be isolated and analysed, they might provide the data to test hypotheses about the relationship between the language of the age and the language of literature.

The accessibility of language change

The first development is the way in which many of the vast social changes taking place in contemporary society have come to be identifiable through language. A central example here would be the movement towards sexual equality, which has had a regular linguistic consequence at several levels - for instance, the legality of job descriptions (most noticeably, at a lexical level, in the use of -**person**, etc.), the status of traditional modes of address (**Miss, Ms.**, etc.), and the problem of resolving the lack of a sex-neutral personal pronoun in English (**her or she** vs. **(s)he**, and other forms). Another example would be the linguistic consequences of legal decisions such as the Trades Descriptions Act, in Britain: there are now certain controls on the language one may use in order to describe or sell goods (for example, constraining the use of terms such as **reduced** at sale time). A third example would be the linguistic dimension to racism: the use of language offensive to minority groups is now a legal matter, and the consequences affect everyone, whether one is writing a magazine article or the entry on **black** or **Jew** in a dictionary. A fourth example is the adoption by major institutions of certain linguistic standards, sometimes in the interests of consistency (as with manuals of house style), sometimes with some notion in mind of preserving the imagined purity of the language (as with the recent French law against the use of Anglicisms). Sometimes the institution's awareness of linguistic problems is itself physically institutionalised, in the form of centres, reports, and the like (for instance, the BBC's Pronunciation Unit, or the British government's

report on language in schools - the Bullock Report (HMSO 1975)). And there are many other areas from which examples could be taken - such as the laws of libel or obscenity - which have a clear linguistic focus.

That there should be a linguistic perspective for a social concern is not in itself novel or interesting. What is, however, impressive is the extensive publicity which is these days given to this perspective, and the relative speed with which social considerations have given rise to linguistic change. Whatever we may think about it, we operate under linguistic constraints, and have available channels of linguistic expression and evaluation, which simply did not exist a generation ago. Under these circumstances, it would not be surprising to find the time-span for the birth and death of a linguistic fashion to be much reduced. Indeed, in the most restricted settings, the rapidity of linguistic change can be readily observed - such as in the world of commercial advertising. For example, an early fashion in the television advertising of washing-powder was to present the product sentimentally, with associations of purity, brightness, softness and love; but very quickly there came a new fashion in which the hard-nosed biochemical function of the product was stressed (**biological action, square-deal Surf**); and in due course, further themes emerged. The linguistic impact of such advertising is always a prominent feature (the "soft sell" voice vs. the "hard sell" voice, for instance); it is frequently lampooned (by television comedians, especially); and quickly becomes part of national consciousness. Moreover, it seems possible to rely on public linguistic memory to a considerable extent, in devising fresh advertisements. For example, there is currently (in Britain) a series of Heineken lager ads which make no sense unless the language of the original ad (now several years old) is exactly recalled: the original series displayed ingenious situations in which lifeless or faulty people and objects were restored through being brought into contact with Heineken, and the slogan was "Heineken refreshes the parts other beers cannot reach"; currently, the advertisers have gone in for lexical play on the word "parts", so that a recent ad reads "Heineken refreshes the pirates other beers cannot reach"!

That an advertising campaign can rely on this kind of popular linguistic recall is itself remarkable; but what is even more remarkable is that the whole business can take root in such a short period of time - perhaps five years to introduce, establish and deviate from a linguistic norm. And while I doubt whether there is anything which moves faster than advertising language, this genre is by no means alone in having a rapid public influence. The other linguistic themes referred to above have also not taken long to come into universal public view, so that (for example) they may also be used as the butt of comic humour (as illustrated by the linguistically-based "jokes", taken from a recent TV show, where feminists were said to be rewriting **history** as **herstory**, and one woman was said to be working on a new version of the opera, **Ms. Butterfly**). I am told that Anglicisms have never had it so good in contemporary France, since the new law banned, and thus institutionalised them. Throughout history, language has always been an early target for satire; but never before have the targets become so publicly accessible, and ammunition so widely available, as now, through the use of broadcasting, the press and advertising.

The varieties of language

But it is not only these fundamental social issues which have developed a linguistic identity in recent years. All walks of life seem to have been affected. Books which once might have been called **Present-day Politics** or **Present-day Religion** are now called **The Language of Present-day Politics/ Religion**. The "language of" theme is pervasive, and has helped draw attention to two characteristics of the contemporary linguistic world which in due course may be construed as major elements of the language of the age: the proliferation of distinctive, institutionalised language varieties, and an accompanying growth in public awareness of the form and function of these varieties. The increase is perhaps most noticeable in relation to public written varieties of language (bureaucratic forms, newspaper formats, etc.) and in the media-specific spoken varieties (sports commentary, newsreading, or the different "voices" of the various BBC radio channels, where regional variation is increasingly encountered). But new varieties continue to emerge, at both specialised and popular levels, in relation to such domains as computing and artificial intelligence, popular medicine and science. One of the most interesting developments, in recent years, has been the presentation of a variety which, though part of British society for decades, has never been publicly accessible before - that associated with parliamentary debate, extracts of which are now broadcast live. The impact of this variety on British popular opinion was notable - in particular, the incredulity with which many people reacted when they heard for the first time the noisy altercations which have since become such a familiar feature of the "voice" of parliament.

It is this principle of accessibility which is crucial. A hundred years ago, the average person encountered only a tiny range of language varieties, compared to his modern counterpart, who will be in contact with dozens of regional dialects or social varieties in a single evening's TV viewing. There must now be a much greater difference between the active and passive competence of the man in the street than would have existed a century ago. There are more opportunities to encounter international as well as national varieties, through the media; and these days there is a growing tradition to expose children systematically to such varieties through the language awareness programmes widely used in school (projects on "language in use", in particular). Moreover, it is not only the opportunity to encounter varieties which has increased; the opportunity to react to and comment on these varieties has also increased. These days, there are phone-ins, cable TV reaction programmes, radio programmes devoted to listeners' letters, and many other ways of involving the "audience". In the USA, it is possible now on certain cable channels for viewers to intervene at selected points in a popular serial: the action on screen is stopped, and they are asked to vote for one of a set of alternatives which they would like to see take place. A significant proportion of the language on BBC radio comes not from the professional broadcasters, but from "listeners": for instance, nearly half of the speech-time on a recent Radio 1 music programme was devoted to the disc jockey talking to listeners, who played a variety of quiz games over the phone. And the language theme is often prominent, as in the ongoing discussion of how formal/informal BBC Radio 4 should aim to be.

Changing linguistic practice in schools is especially important for the argument of this paper, as it is an area which can clearly illustrate the possibility of generating hypotheses about the relationship between linguistic and literary fashion. A generation of British schoolchildren is growing up which, from a linguistic point of view, is characterised by two features, one negative, one positive. The positive feature has already been referred to: the increased exposure they are getting to language varieties, from a generation of teachers who have been trained using the language awareness ideas of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The negative feature is that the children are now unaware of the prescriptive traditions of English grammar which helped to form the sense of correctness that was part of the intuition of previous generations (since the 18th century). In the mid-60s, there was a sharp decline in formal grammar teaching in British schools, and in a very short period of time, even elementary terminology ceased to be referred to. Now I am not concerned in this paper to debate whether this change is a good or a bad thing, but simply to draw attention to the suddenness of the change, and its long-term effects. I remember noticing the change several years later, at university level. My first-year linguistics course had always discussed basic linguistic ideas by contrasting them with the notions of traditional grammar: absolute notions of correctness could be compared with sociolinguistic notions of appropriateness, and illustrated from a range of topics, such as split infinitives. But then, one day, a generation of students arrived who had never heard of an infinitive, let alone realised that there was a tradition around saying that it was wrong to split one! I had to rewrite my first-year lectures, as a consequence.

The effect on literary language

The proliferation and increased awareness of language varieties in the public domain has led to a corresponding growth of interest among professional students of language. In the forefront of this trend are the stylisticians, sociolinguists, ethnographers of speaking, textlinguists, teachers of English for special purposes, and many others whose activities in this domain as yet have no name. The trend has already exercised some influence on contemporary critical studies - for example, in the **Language Library** series, there is Blake (1981) on non-standard language in English literature, Elliott (1984) on Hardy's use of dialect, Bolton (1984) on Orwell's language in relation to the present-day, Phillips (1984) on social variation in language in Victorian England, and Chapman (1984) on the relationship between phonetic and graphic forms of representation in literature. It is evident that at no previous time has there been such a range of man-power investigating language variety. Nor has there ever been such a range of technical apparatus available to enable language descriptions to be made and interpreted. When we recall that such essential pieces of linguistic equipment as the tape-recorder were not invented until the 1940s, it is all the more noteworthy that we now have accessible in computational form enough data about the spoken and written varieties of English to keep several generations of linguists happily occupied.

And surely this is the major difference between past and present studies of linguistic fashion! Whatever the "language of the age" was when Wordsworth and Coleridge were alive, we shall never know. But it is likely that the

present-day language of the age - or at least a fair piece of it - has already been captured alive. When enough time has gone by, it will be possible to make the first ever systematic empirical diachronic investigation of speech. By then the literature which this age gave rise to will have been written and evaluated. At that point, therefore, it ought to be possible to select important features of literary expression and see whether they correlate in any interesting way with trends in general language use. Retrospectively, if there is a clear positive or negative correlation between the language of the age and the language of its literature, it ought to show up.

But what about prospectively? Can we say anything at all about the literary fashions of the next generation, on the basis of what we have discovered already about the linguistic fashions of the present one? Given the speed at which language is currently changing, and the detailed studies of variety currently being made, it might be possible to use our available knowledge to generate hypotheses about the future of literary language. In particular, we might begin to speculate about how specific changes in the repertoire of varieties which form the everyday awareness of a community might begin to affect a contemporary author. An early development, one imagines, would be to see a wider range of variety features and allusions in an author's work, as he (a) builds on his own broader linguistic experience, and (b) realises that his readership will intuitively recognise variety references as they are introduced. To take the example of parliamentary language, referred to above: is it likely that a British author ten years ago would have written a line such as "When the Home Secretary arrived in the hall, he was greeted with a growl of discontent that made him feel quite at home"? Possible, of course - but likely? Given the limited awareness of the context to which the allusion refers, I would think not. By contrast, this would make good sense to a contemporary British audience. Or again, what chance of clear interpretation would regional voice description have had a generation or two ago? Would a description such as "He spoke in the flat, mocking tones that always reminded her of a Mersey ferry" have made any sense? In Britain, since the Beatles, and a host of radio and television plays which have focussed on the Liverpool area, the description would have an immediacy of recognition that must have been lacking before.

Might one not therefore generalise, and predict that there will be an increased range of allusions to the forms and functions of variety-specific language, as authors tap the powerful expressive resources of this domain? Might one not expect to see a wider use of distinctive regional and social accents, both national and international? Might one not expect to see a wider use of variety conventions - both norms, and departures from norms? Given the tradition of the play within the play, or the film within the film, might not increasing use be made of the variety within the variety? As a consequence, might it therefore become increasingly difficult to identify clear genres, along traditional lines, in their stead finding works which juxtapose variety forms for particular effects? For example, the public discussion which followed the recent award of the Booker McConnell prize to D.M. Thomas' **The White Hotel** paid particular attention to the mix of varieties it used - poetry, documentary prose, imaginative prose, letter-writing, postcards, scholarly writing, footnotes, and so on. Is there not a linguistic fashion in its infancy

here, which bodes well for the novel, given the potential scope of that genre to incorporate and juxtapose large- as well as small-scale variety features? Equally, does this trend not bode ill for the short story?

Of course, a few isolated examples do not constitute a theory, but they do, I believe, motivate several hypotheses about the future of literary language which - and this is the point - are capable of being tested. It should be possible to identify and quantify ranges of usage, using the descriptive techniques which are currently available. To take a typical, if trivial example: it is presumably possible to predict that authors brought up in Britain since the early 1960s will no longer make allusions to the metalanguage of traditional grammar. Not that this has ever been a very productive area of literary expression, in the twentieth century, but when it is referred to, it identifies the issue of change in fashion very well, as the following anecdote illustrates. During one of Alan Bleasdale's plays about the Liverpool unemployed, **The Boys from the Black Stuff,** a young man is talking to two civil servants, one of whom criticises him for using a double negative: But there's two of you, he retorts! It so happened that watching the play with me were my wife and two teenage children, aged 18 and 16: my wife and I laughed at this point, but the other two did not, and required an explanation subsequently. This led to them observing that, for a theme as modern and relevant as society's treatment of the unemployed, this allusion was out of place. And out of character, too. "Only old people would know about double negatives, then", one of them said!

I tell this because it is the source of the present paper. It remains to be shown whether more complex areas of experience will demonstrate such interesting metalinguistic generation gaps, or indicate the fruitfulness of the notion of variety as a means of investigating linguistic fashion. But for those who carry out these investigations, it is to be hoped that they will not encounter, in such a barbed way, such a clear interpretation of the "language of the age" as the "language of the aged".

References

Blake, N. 1981. **Non-standard language in English literature.** Oxford: Blackwell.

Bolton, W. 1984. **The language of 1984.** Oxford: Blackwell/University of Tennessee Press.

Chapman, R. 1984. **Sight and sound in English literature.** Oxford: Blackwell.

Crystal, D., and D. Davy. 1969. **Investigating English Style.** London: Longman.

Department of Education and Science. 1975. **A language for life.** London: H.M.S.O.

Elliott, R. 1984. **The language of Thomas Hardy.** Oxford: Blackwell.

Phillips, K. 1984. **Language and class in Victorian England.** Oxford: Blackwell.