New Perspectives for Language Study. 1: Stylistics

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ONE OF THE MAIN CRITICISMS that can be justifiably and usefully directed at traditional approaches to English language study is that they are too restricted in scope, too monolithic, to provide an adequate picture of the language. The central issues are nowadays quite familiar; the concentration on written English to the exclusion of spoken, and on formal, literary styles of the language at the expense of the informal and conversational. Even the major handbooks of English grammar, such as Jespersen's, are skewed by being focussed too markedly on the literary. When seen in its historical context, of course, much of this selectivity is understandable. Before you can study spoken language properly, you need a tape-recorder, or some similar device, to facilitate the making of a permanent record, but tape-recorders were not invented until the 1940s. Also many of the varieties which constitute present-day English are of relatively recent development—the various kinds of radio and television English, for instance, or the language of advertising, which are all slowly but surely making their mark on the pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary of the language. However, it is but recently that linguistic approaches to the study of English have begun to do anything more than pay lip-service to the need for a more comprehensive eclectic account of the language as a whole, and one of the clearest indications of a movement in this direction is the subject generally labelled *stylistics*.

Stylistics is a label that covers the whole complex of varieties and styles that make up 'a' language—comprehending such differences as the distinction between written and spoken English, monologue and dialogue, formal and informal, scientific and religious, and many more. For some people, stylistics means simply 'the study of the language of literature', or 'the study of the language habits of specific authors'; but in my view this is a rather misleading and back-to-front way of approaching the subject. It is true that the concept of 'style' is generally discussed in a literary context, and usually restricted to those linguistic features which define a single author's (or a literary group's) individuality—as when we talk of Shakespeare's style, or the style of the Romantic poets. But the dramatic, original, vivid

expression which we may find in literary language is only fully
interpretable if we view it against the backdrop of our *everyday*
use of language. Literary language is language being used in a
special way; it is never (even in the most 'conversational' of
dramas, as in some of Pinter's plays) a faithful reflection of every-
day speech, and it may depart very considerably from the gram-
matical and other norms of such speech (as in the examples from
Dylan Thomas or E. E. Cummings which linguists are so fond of
citing in discussing this point)[1]. We may and do, of course,
respond to literary language in a quite unconscious, direct,
sensitive way, and this requires no reference to non-literary
usage; but as soon as we wish to explain the *basis* of a literary
linguistic effect, either to ourselves or to others, then we need to
make some reference to the normal patterns of language which
the author has manipulated in order to produce this effect.
Stylistics in this context, is simply a technique of explication which
allows us to define objectively what an author has done in his use
of language.

There is an alternative way of making this point clear. Literature
is generally agreed as being in principle mimetic of the *whole
range* of human experience: there is no topic which is by definition
outside the bounds of literature. But this means linguistic ex-
perience as well as non-linguistic, which in turn implies that
defining the special linguistic usage which is part of the distinctive-
ness of literature presupposes an awareness of language as such.
This can be seen by considering the elementary fact that an
author can bring into his writing *any* use of language he pleases.
Look at the range of usage which authors like Joyce or Eliot
bring into their work: religious language, legal language, conver-
sation, medieval English, and much more—even, at times,
languages other than English (as in *The Waste Land*). An
understanding of all these varieties is obviously important in
order to follow the author's intent, but in order to achieve
this understanding, the varieties must first be studied *in their
own terms*. You cannot understand Joyce's idiosyncratic and
ironic use of religious terms until you first know the meaning and
use of religious terms in their original context, otherwise the
point of the allusions is lost. Literary genres like satire provide a
further illustration of this point. A few years ago, there was a
fashion of satirical reviews on British television, and there were
some very successful sketches of, say, a sports commentary being
intoned in a tone of voice and using the grammar and vocabulary

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[1]For a general discussion of this matter, see the chapters on style in R.
Quirk, *The Use of English* (Longmans, 2nd edition, 1968).

more appropriate to a sermon. The incongruity was the cause of the humour, but again, the perception of this incongruity required the prior perception of the elements which were being brought into juxtaposition.

To understand the literary style, then, you must first be aware of non-literary styles: literature must be embedded in a context of normal usage for its full interpretation, for otherwise whatever is original in its language will be obscured. This is why stylistics has to be viewed as a general subject, the study of all the varieties which constitute a language, and this is why it is relevant to the task of producing more comprehensive linguistic descriptions. But certain theoretical concepts need to be defined in order to make stylistic analysis possible; and one of the most important of these is the idea of a *variety*.

A *variety* of a language is a set of linguistic forms which have a regular connection with a particular social situation or set of situations—not a necessary, obligatory connection, but enough of a connection to give speakers an intuitive feeling of the existence of a link between the language and the situation. For example, 'religious English' would be considered a variety of the language, because the kind of English regularly used in situations that would normally be labelled religious has certain predictable characteristics which the majority of native speakers would intuitively recognise, even though in stereotypic form. Similarly, one could cite 'scientific English', 'formal English', 'commentary', and so on. Some of these labels are very easy to define in linguistic terms; others are extremely difficult. The job of stylistics, then, in this general sense, is to define the linguistic features which are regularly used in recurrent situations, and to categorise the kinds of English that are demarcated in this way.

Information of this kind is highly important for English language teaching, but it is still rare to find any attempt being made to incorporate it systematically into a course. This is understandable, in view of the absence of any 'dictionary of stylistic features' which the teacher may turn to in order to find out exactly what it is that is idiosyncratically 'scientific' about scientific English, what is 'colloquial' about colloquial English, and so on. The big dictionaries are of some help as far as vocabulary is concerned, in that they very often label restricted lexical usage, but you cannot rely on any consistency here. And grammar books on the whole do not give stylistic information. Textbooks on phonology, too, are notorious for their overconcentration on the mythical accent known as R.P. However, if the need for stylistic awareness is made clear, then perhaps this might stimulate further research into the matter. Why, then, is stylistic information of relevance to the English teacher?

First, an important theoretical distinction must be made
between the recognition and production aspects of language use.
The phrase 'a good command of English' after all means both
ability to use and ability to comprehend English in use, and this
affects the study of language varieties as much as anything else.
For it is not the case that the only—or even the primary—aim of
stylistics is to improve your *speaking* ability of a language. At
least as important is the concern to train people—native speakers
as well as foreigners—to *respond* appropriately to the various
kinds of English as they are used. There is a parallel here with the
concepts of active and passive vocabulary in language study.
We are trying to develop an awareness of the *potential* of the
language, of the range of resources that the language has to offer.
For the native speaker, this might involve learning how to
interpret some of the more specialist kinds of English, such as the
styles of legal language or official, 'civil-service' language. For the
foreigner, it might mean concentrating on particular areas of
immediate practical value, such as developing a reading know-
ledge of scientific English, or a speaking knowledge sufficient to
communicate with tourists, or, more ambitiously, awareness of
the specific characteristics of selected literary genres. We can
never master the whole of a language: even native speakers have
only a partial command of the lexicon of a language, and most
speakers never make use of some of the more complex gram-
matical structures available. But on the other hand, we should
not blindly generalise a single style of speaking into all circum-
stances, making it identical with the whole of the language. It is
this particular kind of superficiality of approach which stylistics
might be able to help eradicate, by making people aware of
exactly what should be done in a given socio-linguistic situation.
Is a particular use of language *appropriate* to the circumstances
in which it is being used? What linguistic conventions are there in
a given situation which require a different interpretation from
that which we are normally used to? Clearly, what is needed is a
general outline of all those features of English which systemati-
cally co-vary with situations, and while the descriptive detail of
this task has not yet been established, it is at least possible to
distinguish and define certain of the *dimensions* of variation which
are relevant for English. Not all of these are considered equally
'stylistic' by scholars, but they would all fall under the general
heading of *sociolinguistics*[1].

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[1]For a more detailed outline and discussion of the point of view taken in
this article, see D. Crystal and D. Davy, *Investigating English Style* (Longmans,
1969). For a general introduction to sociolinguistics, see D. Hymes (ed.),
Language in Culture and Society (Harper & Row, 1965).

We may begin by briefly considering what would fall under the heading of 'dialectal' information.

(a) *Regional dialect*. The utterance may contain information as to the geographical place of origin of the speaker—which in the case of English involves both international (e.g. British v. American) as well as intra-national dialects.

(b) *Class dialect*. The utterance may contain information as to the position of the speaker (or writer) on a social scale of some kind, e.g. upper/middle/lower class. An example here would be the use of *I ain't*, which would be interpreted as an indication of lower-class origin in British English.

(c) *Temporal dialect*. The utterance contains information as to the provenance of the speaker or writer in terms of a time-scale, e.g. whether he belongs to an old or a young generation, to the sixteenth or twentieth century.

These dimensions refer to features of language which are all relatively permanent and uncontrollable characteristics of spoken or written utterance. They tend not to change over short periods of time, and are rarely consciously manipulated by the individual language-user. They are therefore very much background features, which the general linguist will be interested in for their own sake, but which are relatively uninteresting from the stylistic point of view because of their insusceptibility to variation in most situations. Against this dialect background, however, it is possible to identify features of a much more transient, controllable, and stylistically interesting kind. These I would group into five types.

1. *Discourse*. The choice of which *medium* of discourse to use (usually a choice between speech and writing) and which method of participation to use (monologue or dialogue) carries with it commitment to the use of particular linguistic features and the avoidance of others. In the former case, we may expect to find in speech certain words and constructions which would never be made use of in writing, unless this were a deliberate attempt to imitate speech (certain slang phrases, for instance), and of course intonation is one central feature of language which cannot be adequately represented in writing. Conversely, certain graphic features (the visual layout of a page, for example) cannot be adequately represented in speech. Moreover, the purpose of the medium may vary and carry with it implications for the use of specific linguistic forms, as when you speak with the intention of having what you say written down, in whole or in part (as in lecturing, or dictation), or write with the intention that

what you write should ultimately be read aloud (as in scripts for radio, or certain types of poetry). The pressures on the language are very different in these cases, and affect all levels of language structure. In lecturing English, for example, certain structures will be more likely to occur than others (e.g. avoidance of imperatives, highly complex 'mixed' sentence types), enunciation will be clearer and generally more emphatic than in everyday conversation (especially in the use of more clearly articulated final consonants and of a wider range of intonation patterns), there will be a frequent use of technical terms and their glosses, and so on, all of which, taken together, constitutes the distinctiveness of this variety in English. And one could point to similar complexes of linguistic features as the defining characteristics of kinds of monologue and dialogue.

2. *Occupation*. This dimension refers to those linguistic features of spoken or written utterance which are due to the expression of the professional role of the language user, as might be found in religious, advertising, scientific, or legal language, for example—contexts in which the sociologist would consider 'secondary groups' to be operating. The use of a distinctive second person singular 'thou' in religious English and the avoidance of the first person singular in scientific English (substituting the passive instead) are generally cited illustrations of this point.

3. *Status*. This refers to those systematic linguistic variations in utterance which correspond with variations in the relative social standing of the participants in an act of communication, as when you talk or write to someone who is higher, lower, or your equal on a specific social scale, e.g. in kinship, business, or military relations. Notions of politeness, deference, intimacy, formality, and informality all enter into the concept of status. In English, most frequent mention is made of the latter two, e.g. the use of contracted verbal forms to indicate informality, or the use of a preposition before a relative pronoun (as being a more formal way of speaking than if the preposition had been left at the end of a clause). There are probably a number of kinds and degrees of formality expressed in English, though they have not as yet been adequately defined.

4. *Modality*. This refers to the linguistic features of an utterance which correlate with its specific purpose, so that the user comes to adopt a conventionalised spoken or written format for his language. Examples would be the difference in grammar, layout, and so on between such varieties of

correspondence as letters, postcards, telegrams, and memos, or between a scientific report, monograph, essay, or textbook. In speech, 'commentary' is an example of a modality: this has a distinctive spoken format, crudely definable as a progression from background description, through description of the ongoing event, to further comment, each stage of which displays certain linguistic correlates, e.g. change in tense forms, choice of intonational and other prosodic features.

5. *Singularity.* All these dimensions (1–4) refer to group uses of language. Once they have been established, there may still remain features which systematically differentiate one set of utterances from another, and these will be found to correlate with the linguistic habits of the individual user, i.e. idiosyncratic features which constitute his own 'style'. Thus, those features of Shakespeare's language which are distinctly his, as opposed to characteristics of other writers of the same period and genre, would come under this heading. Or, whenever an author introduces something which is linguistically original into his writing, it would be discussed under the heading of singularity. This dimension is therefore particularly important for the study of literature.

The remaining linguistic features of speech and writing should now be 'common-core' features, i.e. features which do not differentiate uses of English in terms of any of the above dimensions, but would occur in all varieties of the language.

It should be noted that the definition of all these dimensions requires reference to linguistic features operating at all levels of the language—segmental and non-segmental phonetics and phonology (in writing, graphetics and graphology), grammar, vocabulary, and semantics. The overall stylistic description of a use of English must be carried out with reference to *all* these levels. Only after this initial description has been made can one then select certain features as being the stylistically most important markers of a particular variety. In this sense, stylistics is simply an extension of normal processes of linguistics, and might usefully be seen as falling within the purview of a (broad) definition of 'applied' linguistics.

The above are, then, the dimensions which the teacher should bear in mind when approaching the study of English, and there may of course be others which further study will bring to light. Sub-classification of the above will also doubtless be of value for more specialist tasks. Certain of the points made here do, however, already tie in with areas of performance which are

regularly referred to in foreign-language teaching, and where learners consistently make errors, and I shall conclude by noting some of these.

(a) The distinction between norms of speech and writing, so that one remembers *not* to introduce contracted verbal forms or highly idiomatic expressions into academic essays.

(b) The distinction between norms of formal and informal speech, so that one avoids giving the impression of being 'stuffy' by introducing the former into the latter, or 'ill-mannered' by introducing the latter into the former.

(c) The use of letter-writing conventions—not just an awareness of the nature of opening and closing formulae (e.g. *Dear Sir . . . Yours faithfully*), but of the overall layout of an English letter (e.g. address in the top right-hand corner, without the name of the sender).

(d) Humour in all its varieties. It has been said that the best *ad hoc* standard of acquisition of a foreign language is the ability of the individual to joke and pun in the L2. Modality conventions are crucial here (e.g. the opening formulae, punch-lines, stereotyped prosodic and paralinguistic features of joke genres, e.g. the 'shaggy-dog' story), as also is an awareness of regional and class dialects, which are regularly used as a source of humour in language.

(e) Language in literature. The point made at the beginning of this article may now be reiterated. Literary analysis presupposes a general awareness of stylistic norms, so that deviations from these norms can be established. This is particularly important in historical studies, where we do not have a clear intuitive basis for assessing this normal language, and where, consequently, research into norms has to be carried out separately. Much of the research in disputed authorship studies (e.g. whether Shakespeare wrote a particular play) is vitiated by the absence of such norms, in fact: it simply is not possible to decide whether more than one man wrote the Epistles attributed to St Paul until one has established definite norms of letter-writing for that particular literary period, and these are difficult, if not impossible, to determine.

There are obviously many specific problems which could be alleviated by reference to a stylistic perspective. It is to be hoped that more comparative studies will take place in order that the full range of stylistic variables in English will be established, thus providing the teacher with the data that is needed for the preparation of classroom materials.

(*To be concluded*)