

Style and Stylistics: An Overview of Traditional and Linguistic Approaches

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Abstract

This article studies two approaches towards style: traditional, impressionistic and objective, linguistic. The purpose is to have a look at the inadequacy of the traditional approach though it definitely provides a basis for the later development of objective approach towards style known as stylistics. Henry Fielding, David Lodge and Michael Riffaterre represent the subjectivity of the traditional approach towards style. Geoffrey N. Leech, Widdowson, Halliday, Berry and Bradford among others represent linguistic approach to style. Various schools of stylistics namely sociolinguistic stylistics, feminist stylistics, functional stylistics, pragmatic stylistics, and pedagogical stylistics have been briefly overviewed. The traditional approach to style without a clear model gives way to linguistics to tackle the subject objectively. Linguistics had offered unlimited ways of looking at a text stylistically. Linguistics itself being an eclectic subject overlapping physics, physiology, anatomy, language, criticism and literature reflects multidisciplinary approach towards style as is obvious from various schools of stylistics discussed here.

Key Words: Style, stylistics, linguistics, schools of linguistics, traditional approach to style, linguistic approach to style

The Traditional Approach to Style

The traditional, literary critical attitude towards 'Style' is subjective and unscientific, and considers it a writer's intuitive insight into aesthetics. This concept of style is essentially ambiguous because the reader may or may not share with the writer and critic the level and delicacy of intuitive perception. It is, therefore, hegemonic, undemocratic and imperialistic in its nature.

Style is a writer's individual mode of expression, way of putting his conceptions into words. It involves a long list of choices at paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes: choice of lexical items, use of tropes and figures of speech, phrasal and syntactic structures and the shape of paragraphs. These choices make the writer an individual as clearly discernible and differentiable as he is in the frequency and quality of his voice, in his behavioral idiosyncrasies and ways of walking and laughing. It is the whole of man, the whole of his self that speaks through his style: "The style is the man", says Buffon (1). This is too sweeping a statement and carries us nowhere, though some parts of the discussion prior

to it are relevant to this research: lexical metaphors are specific paradigmatic choices of the author that certainly influence and are influenced by syntagmatic axis. Following literary references further clarify the traditional concept of style:

Chambers' Twentieth Century Dictionary defines style as "A literary composition: manner of writing, mode of expressing thought in language or of expression, execution, action, or bearing generally: the distinctive manner peculiar to an author or other" (2). The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English considers style sum of "collective characteristics of the writing or diction or way of presenting things or artistic expression or decorative method proper to a person or school or period or subject matter exhibiting these characteristics" (3). According to Encyclopedia Britannica style does not "exist on paper at all; it is the way the mind of an author expresses in words" (4). A Dictionary of Literary Terms defines style as

"The characteristic manner of expression in prose or verse; how a particular writer says things. The analysis and assessment of style involves examination of a writer's choice of words, his figures of speech, the devices (rhetorical or otherwise), the shape of his sentences, and the shape of his paragraphs-- indeed, of every conceivable aspect of his language and the way in which he uses it. Style defies complete analysis or definition... it is the tone and voice of the writer himself; as peculiar to him as his laugh, his walk, his handwriting and the expression on his face" (5).

Gray in his *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* writes about style that it is "the characteristic manner in which a writer expresses himself—or herself—, or the particular manner of an individual literary work. Each writer's style is unique, but it may be a combination of many different factors, such as typical syntactical structures, a favorite or distinctive vocabulary, kinds of imagery, attitude to subject matter, kind of subject matter, and so on" (6). This definition comes closer to the purpose of this research though in a general way. It refers to syntactic structure, vocabulary, imagery and attitude to subject matter, and all of these elements are part of a metaphor. Gray says that "Criticism often consists in description of a writer's style by analysis of syntax, tone imagery, point of view and, indeed, every characteristic linguistic feature" (7). Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English writes that style is "A particular way of doing something, or producing something, especially one that is typical of a particular period of time or of a group of people ... [It is] the particular way someone uses words to express ideas, tell stories etc" (8).

Investigating English Style defines style from speech perspective. "Sense of style (implies) semi-instinctive knowledge of linguistic appropriateness and (more important), of the taboo, which corresponds as closely as possible to the fluent native speaker's". (9). They consider the cliché observation that style is the man to be 'mistaken' and refer to it as "a selection of language habits, the occasional linguistic idiosyncrasies which characterize an individual's uniqueness" (10). They give four senses of 'style': "some or all language habits of one person"; "some or all language habits shared by a group of people at one time, or over a period of time"; "effect of a mode of expression", and fourthly, in evaluative literary sense with the previous three meanings overlapping they find the first and second meaning nearest to their perception (11). "English Literature: A Student Guide" writes that in its simplest form style is "the collective impression left by the way an author writes. An author's style is usually individual, his literary

fingerprint” (12). Again the phrases ‘the collective impression’, ‘individual’s literary fingerprint’ or even the four senses given above because of their impressionistic nature are off the point.

Havelock Ellis says that style is not merely an invisible transparent medium, not merely a garment of thought but the thought itself. He considers it miraculous expression of spirit possible in no other way (13). Henry Fielding’s words are worth quoting: “there is no branch of criticism in which learning as well as good sense is more required than to the forming an accurate judgment of style, though there is none, I believe, in which every trifling reader is more ready to give his decision” (14). Ellis’s statement, despite its beauty, is very personal and subjective. Fielding’s observation on style suggests a need for accurate judgment of the phenomenon and in this respect looks forward to and anticipates linguistic treatment of the subject.

Subjectivity in Traditional Approach to Style

A cursory glance at some of the traditional definitions of style quoted above shows their impressionistic nature that renders them unacceptable for and inapplicable to a linguistic analysis. Style is sum of collective characteristics of writing, diction and expression; it does consist in individual linguistic idiosyncrasies; it is the collective impression left by the way an author expresses himself; but despite all this, vagueness stays there. These pseudo-definitions neither have any scientificity and definiteness that linguistics requires nor does the researcher find any clear way to follow. One definition or two that come close to the stance of this research refer to style as choice of words, figures of speech, devices, syntax, favorite vocabulary, kinds of imagery etc.

Linguistic Approach to Stylistics

As linguistics studies language scientifically, it studies style as well in an impersonal and objective manner. Stylistics defines, studies and analyses style objectively and technically applying methodology of linguistics. Literature was traditionally appreciated non-technically and the critic depended on his superior vision and arbitrary good taste of the reader. Catherine Belsey refers to Frye who, like New Critics, in pursuit of objectivity, considers “Existing criticism without system, atomistic, intuitive and so finally elitist, a ritual of sensibility which mystifies the possession of an illusory ‘good taste’. In place of this ‘mystery religion without a gospel’ he proposes that criticism should become a coherent and systematic study...” (15). Stylistics, on the other hand, evaluates a literary text precisely. Descriptive linguistics gives stylistic analysis of a text at phonological, syntactic and semantic levels of linguistic description. Stylistics uses its own meta-language and terminology to analyze a text and to parse its items and structures. The communicative power and connotative significance of these isolated linguistic items and structures is evaluated objectively. John Lyons says that style implies “those components and features of a literary composition which give to it individual stamp, marking it as the work of a particular author and producing a certain effect on the readers” (16).

Riffaterre has well put the role and function of stylistics: “The author’s encoding is permanent, but the process of decoding changes as the language changes in the course of time. Stylistics should encompass this simultaneity of permanence and change” (17). M. Riffaterre’s definition of style is more enlightening and also suggests the function of stylistics: “Style is the means by which the... encoder ensures that his message is decoded in such a way that the reader not only understands the information conveyed, but shares the writer’s attitude towards it” (18). Riffateur’s approach is relevant to this

linguistics and literary history” (28). Spitzer, the father of ‘the New Stylistics’, contributed to literary criticism in two ways:

“He asserted and demonstrated that in causally relating a particular literary effect to a particular order of language, criticism takes a significant step forward from impressionistic appreciation---goes perhaps as far as it can go in explaining the effectiveness of a literary text... His achievement was his development of a method for dealing with the style of long and complex structures, such as novels. It has been described as the ‘linguistic’ or ‘philological circle’” (29).

Similarly, Cluysenaar, as quoted by Malmkjær in the Linguistic Encyclopedia, considers literary stylistics “an extension of literary criticism” (30). Gray Louis is close to this observation when he says that “the real linguist is half a literateur and the real literateur is half a linguist” (31). Margaret Berry in an introduction to systemic linguistics defines stylistics in the same vein in a more direct way: “stylistics is the application of linguistics to the study of literature” (32). Linguistics is sometimes defined as a language for talking about language. So is the case with stylistics: linguistics has helped literary scholars “to express their observations about literary works more neatly, more precisely and less emotively than is often the case in critical writing” (33).

M.A.K. Halliday, however, considers linguistic study of a text superior to the literary criticism : “There is a difference between ad hoc, personal and arbitrary selective statements such as are sometimes offered, perhaps in support of a formulated literary thesis, as textual or linguistic statements about literature, and a description of a text based on general linguistic theory.” (34) Fowler deduces Halliday’s position from this statement that “the literary criticism of language is logically inferior because the critic makes up his mind in advance and then supports his claims by citing selected aspects of the text” (35). English Literature: A Student Guide proposes the function of stylistics as the analysis of a piece of literature in terms of its speech patterns, diction meter, rhythm and syntax and use of rhetorical figures of speech and other textual features (36).

Finch defines stylistics as the branch of linguistics that applies the methodologies of linguistics to analyze the concept of style in language (37). Stylistics has its own framework, approaches and techniques for interpretation and description of a literary text. The core focus of this area is to get at the very clues embedded in the text consciously or unconsciously by the creative artist. Richard Bradford in Stylistics traces its origin in the Greek *techne rhetorike*, the art of speech. “Rhetoric is an art, a necessary condition of philosophical debate. To perceive the same fact or argument dressed in different linguistic forms is not immoral or dangerous” (38). Perception of different literary forms is an obvious reference to variant stylistic features of different texts. Analyzing the history of twentieth-century criticism, Bradford says that the New Critics and the Formalists inherited the tradition of rhetoric maintaining a belief in empirical difference between literary and non-literary language discipline of rhetoric, in the sense that they have maintained a belief in the empirical difference between literature and other types of language and have attempted to specify this difference in terms of style and effect.

Bradford divides “different approaches to stylistics into two basic categories: textualist and contextualist” (39) and places the Formalists and New Critics in the former one. Cleanth Brooks’ *The Well Wrought Urn* is a classic of textual stylistics. New Critical stylistics not only identifies “linguistic features that make poetry different from other

discourses, but with poetry as a form of signification which mysteriously transforms the familiar relationship between language and meaning” (40).

Stylostatistics, the statistical study of style, is another interdisciplinary area within stylistics that studies a text by studying frequency of a particular linguistic item e.g. word-length. It was an American geophysicist T.C. Mendenhall who gave the idea that “word-length might be a distinguishing characteristic of writers...” (41).

Schools of Stylistics

Sociolinguistic Stylistics

Fowler advocates sociolinguistic frame for the study of literary style: “The literary style can be interpreted in relation to the stylistic conventions which generate it and the historical and sociological situation which brought it into existence” (42). Fowler believes that the ways and habits of the world and ideological and sociological registers do affect and pervade into the stylistic character of a text. Bradford describes Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism in the following words: “there is a competitive dialogue between the various styles in the text, supplemented by the text’s attempt to alter and reshape the discourses it has borrowed from the non-fictional world” (43). Sociolinguistics, unlike textualist stylistics, seeks to find social and ideological context functioning behind and developing stylistic character of a literary text.

Feminist Stylistics

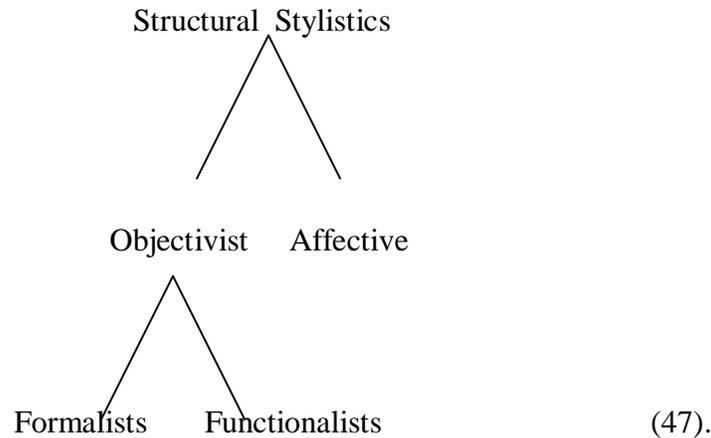
Feminist stylistics also believes that social and institutionalized prejudices and ideologies are embedded in a text and that stylistic character of literature mirrors perceived gender roles of a society. Although Margaret Walters refers to an ironic gesture with reference to Virginia Woolf: “Curiously, one of the sharpest attacks on the word feminism came from Virginia Woolf, whose *A Room of One’s Own* is such an effective and engaging plea for women” (44). Bradford quotes Woolf’s observation that women writers chose the novel form because the older forms of drama and poetry were hardened and fixed and “the novel was young enough to be soft in her hands” (45).

Deirdre Burton says in her article on Sylvia Plath: “...

stylistic analysis is not just a question of discussing ‘effects’ in language and text, but a powerful method of understanding the ways in which all sorts of ‘realities’ are constructed through language. For feminists who believe that ‘the personal is political’ there is a burning issue which has to be investigated immediately, and in various triangulated ways. We want to understand the relationships between severe and crippling depression that many women experience and the contradictory and disabling images of self available for woman in models of literature, media, education, folk motions of the family, motherhood, daughterhood, work, and so on” (46).

Functional Stylistics

Functional stylistics is an umbrella term for a number of linguistic theories of 1950’s and 1960’s and their application in literary stylistics. Taylor and Toolan in their essay *Recent Trends in Stylistics* observe that structural stylistics is divided into two camps, one holding objectivist theory and the other holding an affective theory of stylistic structure, and the former group is subdivided into formalists and functionalists.



The functionalist credo in Halliday's words is: "The particular form taken by the grammatical system of language is closely related to the social and personal needs that language is required to serve" (48).

Jakobsonian Formalist Stylistics excludes the reader from the consideration of a literary text. It studies all the instances of repetition and parallelism and deviant uses of language in a "mechanical, lifeless and sterile" way whereas "stylistic analysis is an interpretive act right from the beginning and hence cannot be objective and scientific" (49). Fish shifts the focus from the text to the reader whose assumptions and expectations are significant. But this reader-oriented or affective stylistics involves the danger of relativism. The next significant development, orientation towards contextualization, augmented by the rise of pragmatics and discourse analysis, acknowledged that text and reader's mind are two extremes far from total truth:

"...meaning and stylistic effect are not fixed and stable, and cannot be dug out of the text as in an archaeological approach, but they have to be seen as a potential which is actualized in a real reader's mind, the product of a dialogic interaction between the author, the author's context of production, the text, the reader and reader's context of reception---where context includes all sorts of socio-historical, cultural and inter-textual factors" (50).

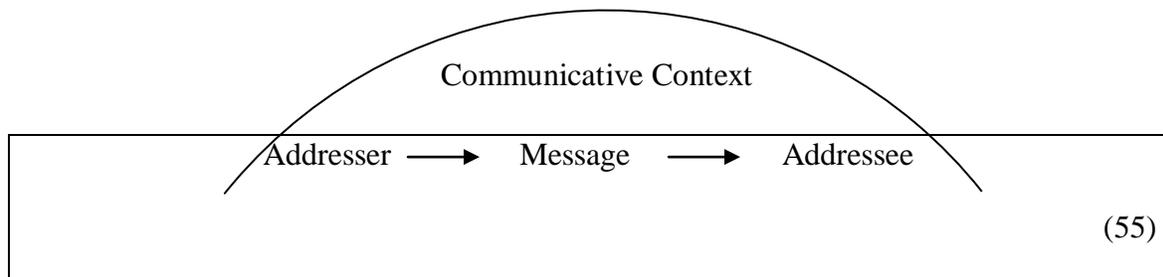
Stanley E. Fish says in his article *What is Stylistics and Why are They Saying Such Terrible Things About It?* that the relationship between grammar and semantic significance of a piece of literature is arbitrary, not natural as is claimed by Thorne and Halliday. Thorne finds in Donne's 'A Nocturnal upon St Lucie's Day' regular flouting of selectional rules in the use of animate nouns and relates it to the sense of chaos and the break down of order (51). Fish refutes this logic with an example that the same flouting indicates harmony in Wordsworth and concludes that "the explanation for (the) meaning is not the capacity of syntax, but the ability of reader to confer it" (52).

Jakobson's approach to the problem of poetic language shows "a particular commitment to linguistic explanation", a prior "commitment to the message as such" (53). Halliday, on the other hand, believes that it is not only pattern in language that makes it literature but also emphasizes the place of semantics in the study of style.

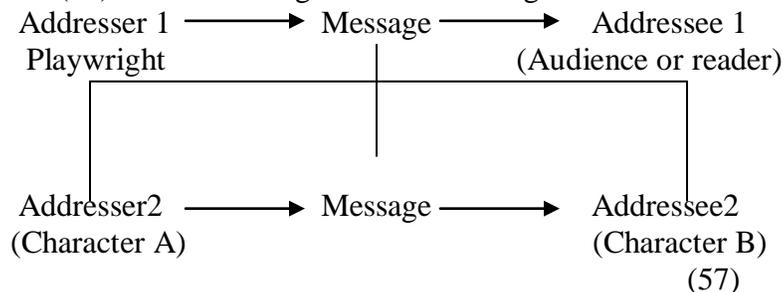
H. G. Widdowson, giving a need and justification for stylistics, says that a literary critic appeals to intuition to grasp the artistic value of a text but the reader may not share this intuitive judgment. Stylistics fills this gap by finding those patterns in the text on which intuitive aesthetic appreciation depends. Thus stylistics is a bridge between trained intuition of a critic and novice observation and reading of a common reader (54).

Pragmatic Stylistics

Growth of pragmatics has also led to many new models and approaches to stylistic analysis of a text. In a canonical form of a communicative event one addresser gives information to one addressee but actual life-like situations afford many deviations. The basic model is:



Drama, for instance, offers one (out of many) possible complexities where “a character speaks to a character and this discourse is part of what the playwright ‘tells’ the audience” (56). Mick Short gives the following model to account for this complexity:



These models suggest that the focus of pragmatic stylistics is on the context, rather than on syntax. Speech act theory further modified the mode of stylistic study of a text. It suggested that a writer not only ‘says’ but also ‘does’ through language. The characters in a discourse interact on certain cooperative principles based upon the following maxims proposed by Grice:

- i- The maxim of quality: “Speakers’ contribution to a conversation ought to be true. They should not say what they believe to be false, nor should they say anything for which they lack adequate evidence.”
- ii- The maxim of quantity: “The contribution should be as informative as is required for the purposes of conversation. One should say neither too little nor too much.”
- iii- The maxim of relevance: “The contribution should clearly relate to the purpose of the exchange.”
- iv- The maxim of manner: “The contribution should be as orderly and brief avoiding obscurity and ambiguity” (58).

Metaphors in this regard seek special attention of the stylisticians for pragmatic evaluation because without flouting any one of the given maxims, metaphorical expressions cannot be developed.

Pedagogical Stylistics

Pedagogical stylistics focuses on literature where “the message is text-contained and presupposes no wider context so that everything necessary for its interpretation is to be found within the message itself” (59). Pedagogical reason “justifies the inclusion of stylistics within applied linguistics seen as in area of enquiry which brings the findings of linguistics to bear on the practical problems of teaching” (60). The problem with literary text is not complex because one can concentrate on the text itself without worrying about distracting social appendages.

Conclusion

Linguistics has provided valuable modes and methods for the study of literary style with objectivity and precision. Linguistic study of style is not a prosaic activity of converting literature into mathematics; it factualizes fancy and imagination. It supplements the traditional treatment of literature and literary style. Stylistics functions as a bridge between to literature, criticism and linguistics.

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