

Original Paper

On Literary Stylistics

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Abstract

Literary stylistics is a discipline mediating between linguistics and literary criticism. Its concern can be simply and broadly defined as thematically and artistically motivated verbal choices, which is a progression from linguistic form to literary significance or interpretation. This paper explicates the foregrounding theory and interpretative process.

Keywords

literary stylistics, foregrounding, interpretative process

1. Introduction

Literary stylistics is a discipline mediating between linguistics and literary criticism. Its concern can be simply and broadly defined as thematically and artistically motivated verbal choices. In other words, as the object of investigation, it refers to thematic and aesthetic values generated by linguistic forms, values which convey the author's vision, tone and attitude, which embody the mingling or shifting of points of view, which add to the affective or emotive force of the message, which contribute to characterization and make fictional reality function more effectively in the thematic unity. This investigation is a progression from linguistic form to literary significance or interpretation. This progression, having the theoretical foundation, involves three correlated levels: structural features, psychological value and literary significance. The paper will begin with the explication of the foregrounding theory. For the question maybe asked what particular linguistic features in a text are going to be relevant to interpretation. Analysts often restrict themselves to those features which, for some reason or other, attract some degree of foregrounding. Then I will discuss the theoretical foundation. Thirdly, the process of interpretation will be touched on.

2. The Theory of Foregrounding

Foregrounding is considered as the most basic feature in literary language and demarcation line between literature and non-literature, Short termed stylistics as “linguistically deviant, and therefore foregrounded”. The notion was first put forward by Mukrovsky of the Prague School. By foregrounding he means that “the aesthetic exploration of language takes the form of surprising a reader into a fresh awareness of, and sensitivity to, the linguistic medium which is normally taken for granted as an automatized background of communication.” He emphasizes that the main manifestation of foregrounding is deviation. Later Halliday defines it as not only deviation from a norm but attainment of a norm. Leech and Short specify that deviation is a matter of degree, hence, qualitative, i.e., deviation from the language code itself—a breach of some rule or convention of English—or quantitative, i.e., deviance from some expected frequency.

2.1 Deviation

Deviation is departure from the norm, which is itself relative and hard to define. We can talk about the norm of a historical period, the norm of a writer, or even the norm manifested in a text. But a creative writer can sometimes go outside the conventions of a language for special effects. Such deviations are called external deviations because the norm is determined outside the text. As Widdowson argues: Literary discourse is characterized by the creation of language patterns over and above those which are required by the linguistic code and these patterns bestow upon the linguistic items within them certain meanings which, when fused with the signification these items have as code elements, constitute their unique semantic value. The following are a few random examples:

The rain set early in tonight,

The sullen wind was soon awake,

It tore the elm-tops down for spite,

And did its best to vex the lake. [Browning]

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window panes,

The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window panes. [Eliot]

A large number of selection restriction violations involve giving the feature of animacy (or/+animate/) to nouns which are specified as inanimate (or/animate/) in the description of the language system. Widdowson has also tried to show how the literary discourse deviate from substitution table where the items on the horizontal plane are syntagmatically related and those on the vertical plane are paradigmatically related. Here is an example:

Table 1. Substitution

The	nurse	Disappeared.
	teacher	Objected.
Arthur	shot	a man from the BBC.
Harold Wilson	ridiculed	the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The items in each column are equivalent from the structural point and whichever is chosen will, when combined with the items in the other columns, form a correct sentence. Thus *nurse* and *teacher* are equivalent but not *Arthur* and *Harold Wilson*, which are equivalent to each other. Again, *disappeared* and *objected* are equivalent, appearing as they do in the same column, but they are not equivalent to *shot* or *ridiculed* but only to *shot the Archbishop of Canterbury* or *ridiculed a man from the BBC* since it is these verb phrases and not the verbs themselves which share the same column as the intransitive verb phrases.

What the substitution table makes clear is that a sentence is both a selection and a combination and these two can be said to be the basic principles of linguistic organization. But Widdowson points out that in literary discourse, a selection is made of a series of items from the same column and equivalence is thereby transferred from the vertical plane of selection to the horizontal plane of combination. Thus, the lines quoted from Eliot's *Four Quartets*

Words strain,

Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,

Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,

Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,

Will not stay still.

might be arranged into a substitution table:

Table 2. Substitution

	Strain	
	crack	under the burden.
	break	under the tension.
	slip.	
	Slide.	
Words	perish.	
	decay with imprecision.	
	will not stay in place.	
	will not stay still.	

Such a table yields a number of paradigmatic choices which can be made to form a complete sentence: *Words strain under the burden, Words slip, Words decay with imprecision, Words will not stay still* and so on. What Eliot does, however, is to combine all the choices so that the linguistic elements become equivalent in combination as well as in selection, and the distinction between paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations is neutralized in this context. It happens to fit in with Jakobson's assertion, "The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination".

A text may set up its own secondary norms. The features of language within a text may depart from the norms of the text itself: they may stand out against the background of what the text has led us to expect. This is the phenomenon of internal deviation. A case in point is a sudden variation in sentence complexity in Hemingway's *The old Man and the Sea*. The culmination of the old Man's battle with the fish is related in unusually complex sentences, conveying a climatic frenzy of movement against the background of Hemingway's more usual simplicity of style. The contrast can be appreciated if we first quote a more characteristic passage from the same episode.

[1] That way nothing is accomplished, he thought. His mouth was too dry to speak but he could not search for the water now. I must get him alongside this time, he thought. I am not good for many more turns. Yes you are, he told himself. You're good forever. On the next turn he nearly had him. But again the fish righted himself and swam slowly away.

[2] He took all his pain and what was left of his strength and his long gone pride and he put it against the fish's agony and the fish came over onto his side and swam gently on his side, his bill almost touching the planking of the skiff, and started to pass the boat, long, deep, wide, silver and barred with purple and interminable in the water. The Old Man dropped the line and put his foot on it and lifted the harpoon as high as he could and drove it down with all his strength, and more strength he had just summoned, into the fish's side just behind the great chest fin that rose high in the air to the altitude of the man's chest. He felt the iron go in and he leaned on it and drove it further and then pushed all his weight after it.

2.2 Parallelism

The other major form of foregrounding is through parallelism which is over regularity in language use. The creative writer may restrict himself in language choice, which shows parallelism or repetition. For foregrounding through parallelism, we try to look for both the similarities and dissimilarities in it. Let us look at an example taken from *A Tale of Two Cities*.

It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness;
it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity;
it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness;
it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair;
We had everything before us, we had nothing before us;

We were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.

This passage is full of syntactic parallelism which leads to foregrounding. In effect, it is made up of seven series of antithesis, each one including two conflicting words. The number of words in each clause is the same, except the last one, in which *the other way* has broken up the pattern set up by the previous lines, and thus secured much emphasis to itself. “The other way” is, actually “we were all going”. Therefore, it displays vividly before us the social reality rife with conflicts and disturbances. Placed in the beginning, it reveals explicitly the theme of the novel.

Another example from *I Have a Dream* is to show how the main idea is foregrounded through parallel structure.

But one hundred years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free.

One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination.

One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.

One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land.

Here we can see clearly the parallel structure leading to foregrounding. Each of the four lines consists of the same adverbial phrase followed by an independent clause, all of which carry a similar contextual meaning. The first clause is the starting statement, which expresses the main idea of the passage. The following are the restatements, which effectively hammer at the main idea by repeating and emphasizing it in different words. So the passage foregrounds the main idea by restatements.

3. The Process of Interpretation

The interpretative process of literary stylistics depends on interpretative experience and intuition. While it stresses close reading of the text and grounds the intuition on evidence, most stylisticians relate interpretation to language description. By reading the text repeatedly, they single out the linguistic features relevant to thematic significance and aesthetic effect and analyse them employing apparatus of linguistic description and then elucidate their literary significance. In such stylistic study, description and interpretation are inseparable. The linguistic features that are described are those, after being interpreted, artistically relevant, whereas the linguistic observation in its turn reinforces or modifies interpretation. The process is demonstrated by Nash in a figure

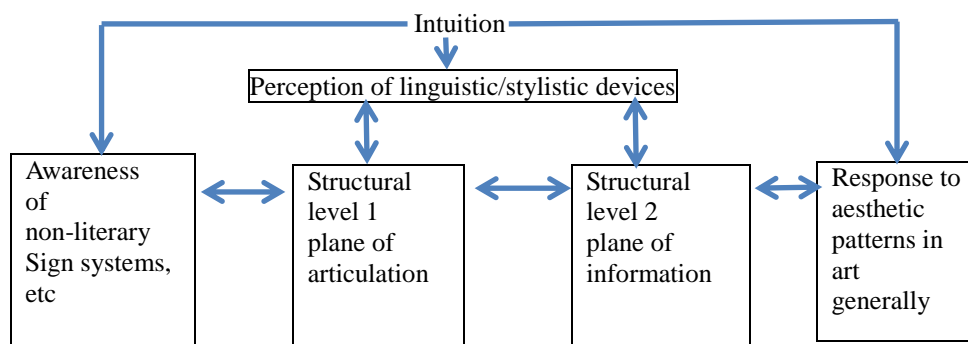


Figure 1. Interpretative Process

According to Nash, the reading of a prose text is a process of mutually supportive responses. Intuition (literary sensitivity, a predisposition to find patterns of meaning) is vital, but after the first impulses it does not continue to work unprompted. Further promptings come with the observation of linguistic/stylistic features which are marked by pairings, contrasts or some other method of foregrounding. Intuition is thus strengthened or modified, and is equipped to begin the definition of structural levels in the text. The discovery of one level involves the perception of another, and meanwhile the detection of linguistic features continues supporting or qualifying the structural interpretation, guiding the intuition to further discoveries. This process has its theoretical foundation.

3.1 The Theoretical Foundation

The existence of stylistics is justifiable in terms of theoretical legitimacy, i.e., backed up by a set of underlying conventions. The major concern in this section is to make explicit the theoretical foundation. As Burton states:

All observation, let alone description, must take place within an already constructed theoretical framework of socially, ideologically and linguistically constructed reality, whether the observer/describer of observations is articulately aware of that frame work or not.

As regards its theoretical foundation, let us consider an analysis of a short poem translated from the Chinese original by Arthur Wally:

Swiftly the years, beyond the recall.

Solemn the stillness of this spring morning says.

These two poetic lines exhibit a skillful use of syntax to mime the meaning. line 1 is “incomplete” in a sense not applicable to line 2. The adverb *swiftly* leads us to expect verb which could still appear after *beyond recall* (read aloud, the intonation should preserve that possibility). The second line, therefore breaks in upon line 1, as if line 1 were short of time, and in incompleteness it represents time stilled instead of snatched away. In the case, we can see a “parallel” between syntactic form and literary interpretation. In its understanding, intuition constitutes one of the two direct involved factors. However, as distinct from such a case as, say, the sight of a tiger causing a sense of horror, the

subjective impression prompted by a linguistic form is not a matter of simply instinctive response. Underlying the stylistician's response there exist certain literary conventions that constitute the theoretical foundation of the stylistician's argumentation. The existence of the underlying conventions "guide the interpretative process and impose severe limitations on the set of acceptable or plausible readings". In *Structuralist Poetics*, Culler argues at length about literature as an institution about (the implied) readers as readers equipped with literary competence (that is a set of conventions for reading literary texts, and the reading activity as a rule governed process of producing meanings. Thus Culler states: to read a text as literature is not to...approach it without preconceptions; one must bring to it an implicit understanding of the operations of literary discourse which tells one what to look for.

Shen Dan argues that three conventions constitute the basic theoretical foundation both of stylistician's claim and of the reader's acceptance of such a claim,—(a) the rule of significance, (b) there being some analogy or parallel, (c) thematic unity of form and content. Only due to the existence of convention (a), will a writer manipulate linguistic forms to achieve certain effects. Convention (b) makes the point that "to be an experienced reader of literature is, after all, to have gained a sense of what can be done with literary works and thus to have assimilated a system which is largely interpersonal". By virtue of convention (c), the stylistician always takes into account features which surround the linguistic forms concerned in context. It is a fundamental principle that directs the interpretative process and imposes severe limitations on the acceptable or plausible readings.

These conventions are at work in the interpretative process. They constitute the theoretical foundation of the stylisticians' mode of argumentation and form the criteria with which to gauge the plausibility of an analysis. The interpretative process, grounded on the conventions, accords with the image used by Spitzer of the philological circle.

3.2 Philological Circle of Spitzer

Philological circle, a kind of interpretative model, was proposed by Spitzer, Father of Literary Stylistics. He advocated that critics should treat a text synchronically by working from the surface of a text to its "inward life-centre" and then, on "arrival" at the centre to integrate the details of analysis into "the creative principle which may have been present in the soul of the artist". Once this done, you then make the return trip to the surface of the text. This process he called the "philological circle".

Spitzer argues that the reader is struck by a detail which is followed by a conviction that this detail is connected basically with the work of art. This means that the analysis begins on an intuitive observation, which in turn raises a question about textual meaning that then requires an answer. But as Spitzer points out, there is no way to guarantee "either the impression or the conviction", they are the result of talent, experience and faith. He wrote:

...all beauty has a mysterious quality which does not appear at first glance. But there is no more reason for dodging the description of the aesthetic phenomenon than of any natural phenomenon...I would

maintain that to formulate observations by means of words is not to cause the artistic beauty to evaporate in vain intellectualities; rather it makes for a widening and a deepening of the aesthetic taste. Here is an argument that analysis of literary texts by linguistic means is not brutalizing of a work of art, but a worthwhile intellectual pursuit that sees the text as a series of clues to understanding a significance beyond language; beyond what the words of the text mean.

Leech and Short consider the philological circle as a cyclic motion whereby linguistic observation stimulates or modifies literary insight, and whereby literary insight in its turn stimulates further linguistic observation. This motion is something like the cycle of theory formulation and theory testing which underlies scientific method. The cycle is represented in a figure.

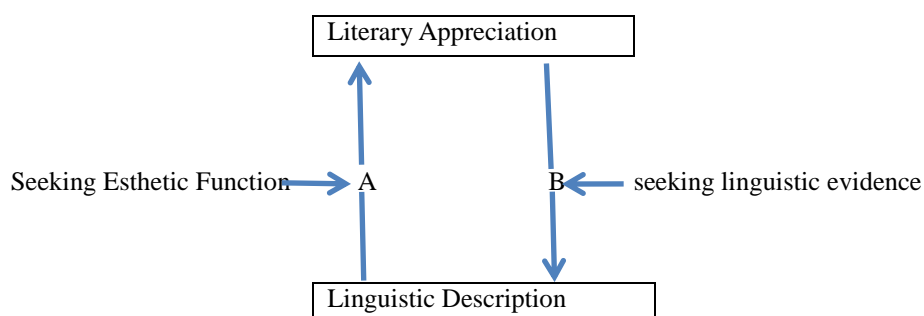


Figure 2. Philological Circle

4. Structural Features, Psychological Value and Literary Significance

Linguistic form covers many specific categories such as surface syntactic choice, lexical choice, figurative expression, metre, alliteration, or modes of speech presentation. These linguistic features are constituted by virtue of the relation or contrast of these structures to their paradigmatically or syntagmatically related structural elements. Such relations or contrasts, often give rise to quite constant psychological values. In the conventionalized syntactic hierarchy, a subordinate clause is seen to be psychologically less prominent than a corresponding main clause. Similarly, the mode of direct speech is seen to have more immediacy or impact by contrast to indirect speech. The different psychological values taken on by linguistic features are frequently exploited in literary contexts as a means of achieving various thematic significance. The following passage from Joseph Heller's novel, *Catch-22* is a case in point.

It was a night of surprises for Appleby, who was as large as Yossarian and as strong and who swung at Yossarian as hard as he could with a punch that flooded Chief White Halfoat with such joyous excitement that he turned and busted Colonel Moodus in the nose with a punch that filled General Dreedle with such mellow gratification that he had Colonel Cathcart throw the chaplain out of the officers' club and ordered Chief White Halfoat moved into Doc DaneeKa's tent, where he could be kept

under a doctor's care twenty-four hours a day and be kept in good enough physical condition to bust Colonel Moodus in the nose again whenever General Dreedle wanted him to.

In depicting a brisk sequence of events, the writer uses a long run on sentence to generate an effect of everything happening at once. There is here a shorter distance between the basic psychological effect of "the syntax being interconnected" and the contextual significance of "the eventing being interconnected, to the point of a pseudo-simultaneity".

Another example:

Curley's fist was swinging when Lennie reached for it (John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, Ch.3)

This sentence has been discussed by Leech and Short: the second clause of this sentence describes the turning point in the fight between Lennie and Curley, and yet Lennie's action is backgrounded by its subordinate status. On the face of it, Steinbeck would have done better to write something like: "As Curley's fist was swinging, Lennie reached for it". But what he did write fits in very well with his overall strategy in the novel, that of absolving Lennie of responsibility for his actions. By downgrading Lennie's part in the fight, he makes it seem an inadvertent and blameless reaction to Curley's onslaught.

From the two cases mentioned, it is important to note that syntactic connection does have to do with the connection between events. That is to say, syntactic relation is conventionally used to reflect or underline the relation between events, syntactic subordination is used to foreground or background events. Similarly, passive voice offers a means of obscuring the agent role; indirect speech, in contrast to direct speech, provides a means of toning down and distancing the speech. There is an intrinsic link between the basic psychological effect associated with the linguistic features and the thematic significance associated with the features in the given literature context.

5. Conclusion

The paper has made an inquiry into the foregrounding theory, the interpretative process so that we can have a better knowledge of literary stylistics, which in turn contributes to our interpretation and appreciation of literary works.

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