

Landmark

The Study of Language and Style in Literature: An Overview

Pushpinder Syal

One of the most interesting things about language is that we often learn more of it when it doesn't follow the rules of prescribed and fixed grammar, but manifests itself in a large number of extraordinary variations which seem to violate those very rules. In fact, language variation is an everyday occurrence around us. The variations include social variations, styles of speaking and writing, and registers from different areas. Metaphors and idioms also find their way into most conversations. Strangely however, children seem to learn, or deduce the underlying grammar of language from this rather varied and idiosyncratic grammar used by their parents and other people around them. Rhymes and verses of the silliest kind, dialectal nuances, "non-standard" pronunciation, incomplete sentences—none of them perfect examples of textbook language—are all grist to the mill, serving a number of purposes at the same time. These purposes include construction of "competence", fulfilment of social and pragmatic "obligations", and development of thought processes and a finely-tuned sense of relationship with the world. It is this basic reality that informs the choice of literature in the language learning curriculum, rather than a general obsession with putting some high-sounding texts into a syllabus; in fact, an intuitive recognition of this reality is probably the reason why literature has been such an integral part of the education process from the earliest times.

Variation is more noticeable when we see it in a particular context such as literature, and the reason for that it is foregrounded. The concept of foregrounding became seminal because of the works of the Russian formalists, and later structuralists (Jakobson, R., 1960; Leech G. N., 1969; Durant & Fabb, 1990). According to them, against a fixed grammar and fixed conventions of speech, the placement of extra patterns of repetition and parallelism of sounds and syntax, or deviation in grammar was foregrounded, i.e. this kind of language was seen as significant. "Significance" is an integrated complex of psychological and aesthetic affect, along with a received set of associations drawn from the storehouse of memory of a particular speech community. Such a signification becomes cumulative and multi-layered in a literary text and creates a "cohesion of foregrounding" (Leech, 1985).

A learner may not always be aware of all the depths of meaning in a literary text. A child, for instance, may not be too concerned at a conscious level with the meaning of a poem, but be charmed only by the incantatory magic of its sound patterns. Conversely, someone who has been instructed to derive meaning from some lines of poetry may be totally oblivious to the intricate sound patterns in those lines. This turns into a tussle when the one becomes a compulsion to the exclusion of the other, or an authority in some form (sometimes in the

apparently benign form of the teacher-educator), and imposes a dominant meaning on the multi-faceted fluid movement of language in a literary work.

How can learners and teachers use the understanding of variation in language, or style in literature to develop their language skills? These two purposes are not at odds, though in later developments that seems to be the case. In the earlier approaches, the study of language of a literary text was an integral part of reading in an instructional framework, whether it was called "rhetoric" or "poetics" or something else. Consider Marjorie Boulton's classic work *The Anatomy of Poetry* (1953), in which the insightful discussions on poetic techniques such as metre, poetic diction, etc., were exemplified and expanded in ways that made the assimilation of the "technical" aspects of poetry quite pain-free. Wayne Booth's equally classic *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), presented the basics of a systematic study of fictional elements such as narrative points of view, much before the sophisticated narratology studies of the later years. However, it is I.A. Richards' *Practical Criticism* (1930), which remains a pedagogic landmark in the area of language study. It provides a reference point, not only because of Richards' focus on the text and the uncovering of literary devices within it which enable the student to make an informed critique, but also because of the relation between such features and their psychological impact on the learner.

With the growth of linguistics as a discipline, the study of literature, was brought within the scope of linguistic analysis. Certain splits emerged within the field with this development. The notion that a hard-core discipline such as "stylistics" had to be supported as a legitimate field of study brought about a rupture from the traditionally integrated approach. To a large extent, this was indicative of the progress in the field. The analysis of metre in poetry, for instance, evolved into more complex phonological explanations,

first in the works of formalists such as Jakobson, then in the generative phonology of Chomsky and Halle. Leech's seminal *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* (1969) was a kind of gateway to a closer linguistic examination of language in poetry, as was Leech and Short's *Style in Fiction* (1981), which looked upon the study of fiction as a literary discourse.

Over the years, many more theories emerged, that strengthened the linguistic methodologies of stylistics. However, the most important theories from the perspective of teaching and learning were those that had a functional approach to the study of language and literature. For instance, in Jakobson's delineation of the six different functions of language, poetic function is one in which language functions to draw attention to itself. It is a special function of language, and operates by displacement of the normal rules at the level of sound, syntax and meaning (1960). Another understanding of the functional aspect of language was given by Firth (1957) and later British linguists such as Fowler (1986), who hypothesized that language functions in situational and social contexts, is purpose-oriented and draws from the discourse of people in the real world. Literary or poetic language is therefore not a matter of verbal artistry or merely decorative in nature, it occurs within specific communicative and social contexts, and is placed within a particular socio-cultural, historical and political setting. All kinds of language acts are therefore performed in the context of a discourse and become meaningful only in such a context. In the context of literature, there are implied meanings. These meanings are derived by readers because they understand that if language has been used differently or some conventions have been violated, it must be because there is an underlying meaning or relevance. This thinking was drawn from the field of pragmatics which grew through the work of Austin (1960) and Grice (1975), and later taken up by M.L. Pratt

(1976) and others. In stylistics, this hypothesis was reflected in Widdowson's (1975) *Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature* and Short (1989).

Another theory- that of Halliday's functionalism- also proved especially useful. Halliday posited that literary style was a matter of realization of linguistic functions such as ideationality (world-creation), interpersonality (participant relations and orientations) and textuality (cohesion within a text). This explanation made it possible to see how each literary work makes a world of language within itself, not a deviation from the norm but a unique norm in itself, with a structure of relations within it, and a textuality that comes from the working of the cohesive features that bind it together. In his important and widely anthologized essay on Golding's *The Inheritors*, Halliday (1971) studied an example of how language functions in a given context through the presentation of a particular world view expressed in specific transitivity relations at the clause structure level. Carrying these ideas further, Widdowson (1975), Fowler (1986) and Carter (1982) analysed individual texts and argued the case for the consideration of interpersonal roles and relations stated or implied in the text (for example, the personae were seen as different from the author, and there could be different kinds of readers implied in the text), through which the text realized the interpersonal function. Halliday and Hasan (1978) stated that it is the cohesive structure of a text that helps it realize its textual function as an organized discourse. Thus, for instance, not only do cohesive features such as pronouns function grammatically to create a text by linking sentences, but they also bring about continuity of the discourse through the creation of subjects and participants within it. These subjects and participants, by virtue of being embedded in the very structure of the text, express certain social roles which are significant in a particular culture. For instance, the pronouns referring to certain

people, speakers, etc., may affirm some roles and exclude other persons, or oppose other points of view. Brown & Gilman's (1960), "*The pronouns of power and solidarity*" explicates this theory very clearly. According to them, these features function to develop a "voice" or "voices" in a literary work- a fact extremely relevant when looking at hidden meanings such a particular gender slant- and support the idea that a text is ideologically constituted to transmit nuances of specific social, cultural and political practices. With this awareness, the reading of literature in the classroom acquires a greater dynamism and relevance as the exploration of language in aliterary discourse leads the students and the teachers to questions themselves, their society and their culture. The conscious attention given to feminist or anti-feminist voices in the emergence of "feminist stylistics" (Mills, 1992) is a development that should be taken into account in this regard. It is hence evident that the study of literature can become an enabling tool for enhancing sensitivity towards human and social issues.

However, we must remember that the emphasis on functional and discourse approaches does not mean that the aesthetic dimension of literature should be overlooked. The point is that a literary text fulfils many functions simultaneously. As Leech shows in his analysis of Samuel Johnson's celebrated "Letter to Lord Chesterfield" (1983/2014), a piece of prose comprising a letter written by Johnson is used by him (Johnson) to achieve three goals: civility (maintaining politeness according to the norms of civilized society), practicality (castigating Chesterfield for his miserliness and getting a stipend from him) and aesthetics (producing a "cleverly parallelistic and climactic use of language"). Thus literary and non-literary objectives work together as in the case of Johnson's letter, which fulfilled a purpose in his real life and was at the same time, a work of art.

This certainly makes a case for the inclusion of multiple readings and perspectives in the literature class. In fact, the proliferation of reader-response theories and hermeneutics in the later part of the twentieth century has resulted in greater empowerment of the readers in the entire process of reception and production of literature. Although earlier structuralist theories asserted that foregrounded features are obvious in a literary text, later theories acknowledged that some readers may find certain features foregrounded which other readers may not. This would obviously lead to differences in their interpretations. Not only this, later research also shows that reading involves many more processes than the simple recognition of prominent structural features in a text. It involves mental schemas, presuppositions, knowledge of cultural conventions and several other factors. This may prove to be a problem for strictly analytical approaches adopted by earlier stylisticians. However, there is no reason why analysis cannot be undertaken to support and elaborate various points of view. In fact, readers may enter into the text from any starting point and may gather evidence to support a point of view; conversely, aspects within the text (as for instance the occurrence of certain pronouns, as mentioned earlier) may indicate outer frames of reference that the readers may find relevant.

Another area of change has been the choice of texts as subjects for stylistic analysis. With the recognition that features classified as "literary" may also occur in our daily discourse—in advertisements, in journalistic writing, political oratory and many other contexts—the object of study has expanded. Earlier, there was an Anglo-centric slant to studies on literature, with only works from canonical texts considered as being worthy of detailed study (and by this activity further validating those canonical texts). There was and to a great extent still is, a great wall of resistance in the Western academic world towards the inclusion of the works of writers

from the non-Western world for analysis. Oddly, linguists have been more conservative in this regard. In fact many of them were ready to categorize the speeches and writings from non-Western cultures into an "anthropological" slot, thereby shelving the works into a convenient space of "other" ethnicities and ethnographies. However, the emergence of strong postcolonial voices in criticism and creativity ensured that literature from all across the world was taken into consideration. This was an important development in the field of stylistics because it offered much more variety in terms of materials such as poetic, dramatic, epic and narrative styles, rather than just the Euro- or Anglocentric texts. Creole literature, and African and Indian writing in English, to mention a few, are important examples of literature where questions of language and cultural sensibility, and the manner of relating the two has been studied. Some work in this area takes up the theoretical and analytical frameworks of Western stylistics to study the writings of African and Indian writers in English (Anozie, 1981; Syal, 1994). The blending of conventions and innovations drawn from oral literatures, performance art, regional and local mythologies and contemporary music and storytelling styles characterize current interest and renew the field in various directions. We may also consider that most cultures, along with their literatures, also have critical traditions of their own. India for instance has ancient poetics, with its advanced theories of *rasa*, *alankara* and various sophisticated stylistic conventions, as well as more recent critical schools in Indian *bhasha* literatures.

One of the consequences of all these developments in the field of literature studies is that the "canon" has been shaken and destabilized, and this is reflected in the curricula right from primary schools to postgraduate literature courses. We are now familiar with the inclusion of short stories by Indian writers such as R.K. Narayan, M.R. Anand and Anita Desai,

and poems such as Ezekiel's 'Night of the Scorpion' and Wole Soyinka's 'Telephone Conversation' in many school English textbooks across India. These are placed side by side with writers from England and America. At one level, this becomes instrumental in the learning of English language by providing interesting and varied reading experiences. At another level, it increases awareness of the fact that English is not just one language, and that it is used by people all over the world in ways that change its syntax, its vocabulary and its overall meaning potential. With this awareness of change and difference, the teachers can engage the children in a more active discussion on the points of contact between writers from different cultures and the various styles of writing that they choose.

An extremely important aspect of the application of stylistic approaches is that they can be used for all languages. If Jacobson and other analysts took up literature in European languages for close textual study and verbal analysis, the same is possible for all other languages as well. In the multilingual environment of India, for instance, the inclusion of writings in an Indian language along with writings in English can be very educative. In fact, it can be the beginning of a useful comparative study of languages, especially at the secondary and tertiary levels. In a paper presented at a literature teaching conference, Agnihotri (1992) illustrated the unique qualities of sound and the use of metaphors in English, Hindi and Urdu poetry by placing extracts of verses from these languages side by side and analysing them. In her Ph.D. dissertation on bilingual methodology, Iqbal Judge (2005), used verses on nature by the Punjabi poet Bhai Vir Singh as an introduction to a poem by Wordsworth; she drew comparisons between the similes used by the two poets.

Translation is another crucial interface through which literature is sought to be made accessible to people who do not know the language of the

original work. Translators have always had to deal with stylistic issues in translation, and they do so by paying close attention to textual features and the presence or omission of elements (as for instance, certain pronouns, or deictic references, which might be missed) to achieve more sensitivity in translation.

Perhaps the entire evolution of the discipline of stylistics and the ongoing developments within it (cognitive stylistics, theories of effect, etc.) that we see taking place may appear to be somewhat daunting for teachers and practitioners. But this overview is in the sense of a background, and an assimilation of different ideas is often possible through practice. Over time, many practitioners in the field of ESL and EFL have made use of literature to improve reading skills and literacy (Brumfit, 1985). The teaching of literature and language as communicative goals are not so far apart that they cannot be mutually enhancing, even though the activities related to their learning maybe different.

Finally, help is at hand in the form of technology. There are now online courses to help us familiarize ourselves with some basic concepts and tools. Some of these (listed at the end of the references) aid a learner, teacher or student, in observing and thinking about texts and comprise important hands-on training which can be developed in an open-ended way and shared with other participants on these courses. This will undoubtedly result in a satisfying collaborative experience of teaching and learning literature for both teachers and students.

References

- Agnihotri, R.K. (1992). *A fine excess: Reflections on the language of poetry*. Paper presented at British Council Seminar on Literature Teaching, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur.
- Anozie, S. (1981). *Structural models and African poetics: Towards a pragmatic theory of literature*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

- Brown, R. & Gilman, A. (1960). The pronouns of power and solidarity. In Sebeok(Ed.), *Style in language* (pp. 253-276). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Booth, W. (1961). *The rhetoric of fiction*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Boulton, M. (1953). *The anatomy of poetry*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Brumfit, C. (1985). *Language and literature teaching: From practice to principle*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Carter, R. (Ed.) (1982). *Language and literature: An introductory reader in stylistics*. London: George Allan and Unwin.
- Durant, A. & Fabb, N. (1990). *Literary studies in action*. London: Routledge.
- Firth, J. R. (1957). Applications of general linguistics. *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 56(1), 1-14.
- Fowler, R. (1986). *Linguistic criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1971). Linguistic function and literary style: An inquiry into William Golding's *The Inheritors*'. In S. Chatman (Ed.), *Literary style: A symposium* (pp. 330-365). London: Oxford University Press.
- Halliday, M.A.K. & Hasan, R. (1978). *Cohesion in English*. London: Longman.
- Jacobson, R. (1960). Linguistics and poetics. In Sebeok (Ed.), *Style in language* (pp. 350-377). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Judge, I. (2005). *The role of bilingual methods and materials in the teaching of English at the undergraduate level in Punjab*. (Unpublished Doctoral dissertation). Panjab University, Chandigarh.
- Leech, G.N. (1969). *A linguistic guide to English poetry*. London: Longman.
- Leech, G.N. & Short, M. H. (1981). *Style in fiction*. London: Longman.
- Leech, G.N. (1985). Stylistics. In van Dijk(Ed.), *Discourse and literature*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Leech, G.N. (2014). Pragmatics, discourse analysis and stylistics and "The Celebrated Letter". In *Language in literature: Style and foregrounding*. London: Routledge. (Original work published 1983)
- Mills, S. (1992). *Feminist criticism*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Pratt, M.L. (1977). *Towards aspeech act theory of literary discourse*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.
- Richards. I.A. (1930). *Practical criticism*. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace.
- Short, M. (Ed.). (1989). *Reading, analysing and teaching literature*. London: Longman.
- Syal, P. (June 1991). The discourse of literature teaching: A questionable matter? *Journal of English and Foreign Languages*.
- Syal, P. (1994). *Structure and style in Commonwealth literature*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.
- Widdowson, H.G. (1975). *Stylistics and the teaching of literature*. London: Longman.

Online Resources for Courses on Stylistics

Ling 131: *Language & style*. Retrieved from www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/projects/stylistics

Free course: www.pragmaticstylistics.org/2008-2007/free_web_base_stylistics_cour.html

Teach English: Intermediate Grammar (4 course specialisation). Retrieved from courser.org

Creative Writing (5 course specialization). Retrieved from courser.org

The Modern and the Post Modern. Retrieved from courser.org

Art and Ideas: Teaching With Themes. Retrieved from courser.org

Pushpinder Syal teaches at Panjab University, Chandigarh. She has published and guided research in Stylistics, language teaching and literature.

pushpinder.syal@gmail.com