



Perspectives in Stylistics

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Abstract

This study investigates crucial perspectives in the literature of stylistics. Like in any other disciplines, perspectives in the language discipline are submissions on discrete subjects. A field of language study, stylistics is the study of style, which has to do with the selection and use of language for effective communication in literary and non-literary texts. This study investigates critical perspectives in stylistics, paying particular attention to linguistic features of a text; such features are essentially the fundamental perspectives in stylistics from classical era to contemporary times. Usually, linguistic features of a text either reveal writers' deviation from normative properties of language or convey writers' uniqueness in the use of language. In conveying such deviation or uniqueness, literary writers do not only succeed in conveying intended messages to readers, but also succeed in making readers feel the intended effects of enchanting language use. In linguistic studies, stylistic features of texts cut across different levels of language analysis (e.g. phonology, diction and grammar). Scholars therefore contend that stylistics is reasonably the investigation of literary discourse from a linguistic purview. Indeed, stylistics is viewed as the link between linguistics and literary criticism. Perspectives in stylistics reveal the concerns of stylistics and its approaches. On the whole, the study concludes that stylistics is: choice-making in language use, rule-governed objective and individualistic.

Keywords: stylistics, style, literary text, non-literary text, discourse.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a conventional means of communication among humans. See Dada (2000) for tips on the definition of language. In stylistics, the intentional nature of language use from writer-end is brought to the fore. Adegbija (1999) posits that language use is not incidental; it is of credit. In a similar vein, Fowler (1981) notes that "linguistic structure is not arbitrary. It is determined and motivated by the functions it performs." With the growth of research in stylistics, the largest unit of language is viewed beyond the sentence. Language is used in literary or non-literary. Stylistics explains the features (dimensions) and motivations in the use of language across genres. A stylistic analyst is concerned with linguistic and extra-linguistic underpinnings that generate and realize textual communication. In language and linguistics, critical perspectives are the bedrock for revealing the thrust of research domains. Given the fact that research is a continuum in any field of knowledge, critical perspectives keep emerging, and are indispensable. This examines stylistics in terms of crucial perspectives that are replete in the literature. The study is significant because the perspectives it identifies and explains provide useful insights for contemporary research in language and linguistics.

2. Text and Discourse

A text is an instance of language use with a subject (topic). There is often structure in a text; this is achieved by using cohesive devices to establish a tie (the relationship between the subject of a text and its linguistic features). Texts are usually meaningful as they convey propositions that are context-driven. From the perspective of context, texts feature speaker-hearer or writer-reader phenomenon which implies its meaning-laden potential. Ruth Wodak and Martin Resigl, cited in Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi E. Hamilton (2001, p. 385) posit that "we obviously need to think

about what our ‘text’ is about, since clearly what a person is talking about has a bearing on what is said and how it is said. We also need to think about who said it, or who wrote it or signed it, who is thought, in its particular socio-cultural context, to be responsible for what it says, who the intended audience was and who the actual hearers or readers were, because who the participants in a situation are and how their roles are defined clearly influence what gets said and how. We need to think about what motivated the text, about how it fits into the set of things people in its context conventionally do with discourse, and about what its medium (or justify a certain social status quo (and ‘racialized’, ‘nationalized’ and ‘ethnicized’ identities to it). Third, they are instrumental in transforming the status quo (and ‘racializing concepts’, nationalities, ethnicities related to it). Fourth, discursive practices may have an effect on the dismantling or even destruction of the status quo (and of racist, nationalist, ethnicist concepts related to it). According to these general aims one can distinguish between constructive, perpetuating, transformational, and destructive social macrofunctions of discourse¹.” The notions “sociocultural context”, “status-quo” and “discursive practices” imply that a text is linked to its antecedents in the universe of discourse (the real world of humans and its social systems). The task before the stylistic analyst is therefore to account for how external nuances relate with language use in the interpretation of a text. Language use can be situated within its social structure which can be referred to as discourse. The notion “social structure” does not only account for the reason why discourse can be analyzed, but also accounts for its underpinnings. This view corroborates Adegbija (ibid., pp. 188-189) who submits that “questions to ask when analyzing discourse include:

- What is the conversation or discourse about? Put differently, what is the topic?
- What comments are being made about this topic?
- Who are the speakers and addressees and what are their roles and relationships?
- How is turn taking effected? What are the turn allocation techniques?
- How has the topic been linked from one speaker to another? Or how has coherence in discourse been achieved?
- How is reference made to different objects, persons, things, places? Is this done backwards, within the text, or outside the text?
- How is meaning decoded from the discourse? (What contributions do the contexts of discourse make to the encoding and decoding of the meaning?).
- What specific and overall functions do the different utterances in the discourse perform?
- How is the discourse terminated by participants?
- What specific function does the discourse perform in the particular social-cultural context?”

Fairclough (1992, p. 8) opines that “discourse constitutes the social. Three dimensions of the social are distinguished: knowledge, social relations, and social identity and these correspond respectively to three major functions of language. Discourse is shaped by relations of power, and invested ideologies.” Commenting on “participant”, “topic” and “context” as features of a text, Johnstone, cited in Olugbenga Ibileye (2018, pp. 6-7) submits that “we obviously need to think about what our ‘text’ is about, since clearly what a person is talking about has a bearing on what is said and how it is said. We also need to think about who said it, or who wrote it or signed it, who is thought, in its particular socio-cultural context, to be responsible for what it says, who the intended audience was and who the actual hearers or readers were, because who the participants in a situation are and how their roles are defined clearly influence what gets said and how. We need to think about what motivated the text, about how it fits into the set of things people in its context conventionally do with discourse, and about what its medium (or media) of production has to do with what it is like. We need to think about the language it is in, what that language encourages speakers and writers to do and what it is relatively difficult to do in that language. We need to think about the text’s structure, and how it fits into larger structures of sets of texts and sets of interactions.”

Like texts, discourse deploys utterances. Such utterances are realized in sequences; in this regard, “discourse markers” are useful. Deborah Schiffrin, cited in Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi E. Hamilton (ibid., p. 62) note that “discourse marker research utilizes a variety of data sources that allow analysts to focus on markers across contexts, across language, and/or over time. These three focal areas address many different specific issues that form part of several general themes of discourse marker research: what lexical items are used as discourse markers? Are words with comparable meanings used for comparable functions? What is the influence of syntactic structure, and semantic meaning, on the use of markers? How do cultural, social, situational, and textual norms have an effect on the distribution and function of markers?” Indeed, discourse involves the use of speech act (performing actions with words). Olugbenga Ibileye (2018, p. 1) avers that “discourse, the theoretical basis of the emergence of the field of discourse analysis, is a pervading phenomenon, which governs human lives and daily activities sometimes in an unconscious way. Discourse has been variously conceived by scholars as the authentic product of human interaction as well as being the concrete aspect of the abstractness of communication. Scholars such as Stubbs, Coulthard, and Gee submit that discourse defines the human essence as it reflects what a speaker wants, who the speaker is and what the speaker does...” To capture the communicative purposes of language, sociolinguists evolve different functions of language: integrative function, transactional function, among others.

3. Stylistics

In language studies, stylistics is simply the study of style. U. Lehtsalu, G. Liiv and O. Mutt (1973, p. 15) assert that “although stylistics is regarded as a relatively new branch of philosophy, its roots go back as far as Ancient Greece and Rome.” In addition, Lawal (1997, p. 25) submits that “stylistics is concerned with the analysis and description of the linguistic features of texts in relation to their meaning.” Stylistics is more concerned with the “interpretation” of texts rather than “critical evaluation” (critique) of texts. U. Lehtsalu, G. Liiv and O. Mutt, (ibid., p. 11) also note that “the term ‘style’ is a polysemantic one. The Latin word *stilus* meant originally a style or writing instrument used by the ancients in writing on waxed tablets. Already in classical Latin the meaning of the word was extended by the process of metonymy to signify the manner of expressing one’s ideas in written or oral form. The word later acquired a further meaning viz. the distinctive or characteristic mode of presentation, construction or execution in any art, employment or product, e.g. the fine arts, sport, etc.” Contemporary linguistic notions and concepts are deployed in stylistics, thus giving it richer insights and sound theoretical footing.

4. Perspectives in Stylistics

In this section of the paper, we present and examine critical perspectives in stylistics.

4.1 Objectivity

By deploying approaches and insights from the literature in the analysis of texts, stylistics is an objective intellectual indulgence. The analyst has a focus: to reveal varied stylistic features of a text. Jing Huang, Shuo, C. and Fang, Yue (2021, p. 32) submit that “modern stylistics is a discipline that explores the style of language based on the concepts and means of modern linguistics. It generally consists of two parts: general stylistics and literary stylistics. The latter focuses on the study of stylistic features in various literary works, while the former includes the study of the characteristics of various styles.” As a reason for its objective approach to textual analysis, the stylistic analyst attempts to provide readers with clear understanding of the underpinnings that motivate and interpret a text. This is the fact in literary and linguistic stylistics. According to Ronald Carter and Paul Simpson (1989, p. 7), “a distinguishing feature of work in literary stylistics is the provision of a basis for fuller understanding, appreciation and interpretation of ... literary and author-centred texts. The general impulse will be to draw electrically on linguistic insights and to use them in the service of what is generally claimed to be fuller interpretation of language effects than is possible without the benefit of linguistic stylistics. Indeed, it is argued that style itself results from a simultaneous convergence of effects at a number of levels of language organization.” Scholars note that grammar models facilitate stylistic analysis of texts, based on the objectives of the analyst. An example is the Structuralist approach to linguistic analysis. Texts conveyed via different languages are subjected to stylistic analysis in a scientific way. The process is often systematic and therefore objective. This is the reason why in the investigation of stylistic features of texts at different levels of linguistic analysis (sounds, words, stretches), the findings of different analysts align. Essentially, stylistics is a procedural domain of linguistic research. In terms of the objective attribute of stylistics or style, Anyanwu Esther’s submission is instructive. According to Anyanwu Esther (2020, pp. 14-27) “style has to do with a particular way or procedure by which something is done ... stylistics is concerned with the analysis, interpretation and evaluation of texts of all categories, whether literary or non-literary, constructed with the verbal apparatus of language, from the perspective of linguistics.” Indeed, the term “apparatus” is suggestive of the scientific and objective nature of research in stylistics.

4.2 Formalism

In the analysis of texts across genres, stylistics hinges on linguistic conventions (formalist approach). In this regard, rules of word-formation, word-class shift, patterning of clauses and sentences impinge on textual message. Contemporary stylistics is devoid of subjective analysis: it is not impressionistic; and it is painstakingly a scientific process. This view corroborates Mohammad Tariq (2018, p. 46) who reports that “at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th Century, the art of rhetoric almost ended and fell in a state where scholars assumed it in linguistics. But in the beginning of the 20th Century, it came back in the literary debate as ‘Stylistics’, though, the term ‘stylistics’ had been used since the early Nineteenth Century. In modern times, it is an analytical science which covers all the expressive aspects of language as phonology, prosody, morphology, syntax, and lexicology ... Stylistics in general is an enquiry or a study of literary discourse which tends to study different styles in language use. According to Merriam Webster Online Dictionary, stylistics is ‘an aspect of literary study that emphasizes the analysis of various elements of style’ and ‘the devices in language that produces expressive value.’ Stylistics is one of the most moderate approaches to literature. Stylistics after the 1950s and 60s onwards has been applied to critical procedures which seem to replace what is claimed to be the subjectivity and impressionism, the standard analysis with an objective or scientific analysis of literary text.” Saussure, Jakobson, Michael Halliday, Widdowson and Geoffrey Harman are instructive in formalism-driven stylistic studies. See Mohammad Tariq (ibid., p. 46) for insights on this claim. As part of stylistic features of texts (formalist properties), sounds are used for enchanting presentation of message. This is dominant in literary writings. U. Lehtsalu, G. Liiv and O. Mutt (ibid., p. 78) assert that “various features of the phonetic system of English have a potential stylistic function. Such phonemes as stress, intonation and the emphatic arrangement of utterances may serve as stylistic devices when they are

used to produce a specific effect or to arouse a definite emotion in the listener or reader. The branch of stylistics concerned with the study of phonetic stylistic device is sometimes called phonostylistics¹.” Studies show that the analysis of diction (lexical categories) in texts is very revealing in terms of the interpretation of writers’ communicative strategies and effective communication of themes. Lexical categories cut across word-class and perform discrete communicative functions. For example, pronouns are used to relate phenomena with characters, while adjectives and adverbs give vivid descriptions of characters, events and settings. Thus, the formal properties of language are crucial in stylistic research. Woravit Kitjaroenpaiboon and Kanyarat Getkham (2016, pp. 7 and 8) submit that “... Leech and Short in their book – *Style in Fiction* (2007: 61) mention that stylistics has four categories of study. The first is lexical categories. Lexical categories focus on lexical items contained in the text. In the text, lexical items have many types, i.e. nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. The second is grammatical categories. Grammatical categories focus on the structure of the sentence. To produce a sentence, the writer or the speaker certainly considers many things such as the use of tenses, complexity level of sentence, active-passive of a sentence, word choice in sentence, and so on ... The third is cohesion and context. Cohesion and context also have a significant role that can be analyzed in the study of language style. Cohesion is a correlation among words and sentences in the text, while context is the place where it stands. In language, a text becomes a discourse when there are cohesion and coherence in it. The fourth is figures of speech. Figures of speech are the forms of speech which are different from common speech in use. By the use of figures of speech, language becomes figurative.” Figurative language is arguably a component of the formal properties of language².

4.3 Extra-linguistics

Although linguistic conventions are used in the stylistic analysis of texts, there are extra-linguistic underpinnings that anchor texts. Writers invoke social phenomena as thematic concerns, even when there are instances “extension of reality” in literary writings. Corroborating the view that the analysis of extra-linguistic underpinnings of language use is within the scope of stylistics, Fakuade (1998, p. 17) avers that “language use (style) is governed by a wide range of contextual factors, including social and physical circumstances, identities, attitudes, abilities and beliefs of participants and relations holding or supposed to be holding between participants.”

4.4 Individualism

Style is individualistic. Stylistic analysis of literary texts accentuates this claim. Authorial differences in style are evident in diction, clause structure, figurative language, etc. Although social contexts underpin language use, the fact remains that style can be individualistic. Commenting on the individualistic perspective of style, U. Lehtsalu, G. Liiv and O. Mutt (ibid., p. 16) posits that “... style bears the stamp of individual usage: every writer has a unique pattern of habits and abilities that constitute his style. This approach is best exemplified in the well-known diction of the 18th-century French poet, critic and naturalist George-Louis de Buffon: *Le style est l’homme meme*.”

The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw the appearance of a utilitarian approach to stylistics remotely linked with ancient and medieval rhetoric. The tendency to regard stylistics as an applied science has been particularly marked in the English-speaking countries, where it was widely believed that the principal aim of a course in stylistics was to improve the style of the reader and of the textbook to show him how better to express his thoughts (F. L. Lucas, G. H. Vallins are among the more recent protagonists of this view). The pronounced tendency which can be observed in English stylistics during the period referred to is that of regarding style as a study of form divorced from thought (G. Saintsbury, J. Middleton Murry). Of foreign linguists it was the French (e.g. Ch. Bally, J. Marouzeau) in particular who have in the 20th century made a definitive contribution towards the development of stylistics. They have been encouraged in doing so by the centuries-old tradition in France of interest in style and the regulation of linguistic usage.” So long as the notion of choice-making abounds in the use of language, style remains individuals’ demonstration of linguistic prowess. This is particularly so because the repertoire of language is not exhaustive. Leech and Short (2007) note that “style is defined in terms of a domain of language use (for example, what choices are made ... in a particular genre or in a particular text).” Style is often used to achieve variation in written and spoken communication; words are selected and used in stretches.

4.5 Typology

The literature of stylistics is replete with the classification of style in terms of domain, periods, focus and approach. Mohammad Tariq (ibid., pp. 47 & 48) submits that “pure, ornate, florid, gay, sober, simple, elaborate and so on are the kinds of styles used in English. English style is also classified according to the periods or conventions of literary history i.e. “Metaphysical”, “Restoration Prose Style”, “Miltonic Style”, “Shakespearian Style”, “Practical Style”, “Contemplative Style”, “Prophetic Style”, “Romantic Style” and “Subjective or Objective Style.” Literary and linguistic stylistics are also important classifications which revolve around divergence in approach and focus. Commenting on linguistic stylistics, Ronald Carter and Paul Simpson (ibid., p. 4) contends that “in several respects, linguistic stylistics is the purest form of stylistics, in that its practitioners attempt to derive from the study of style and language a refinement of models for the analysis of language and thus to contribute to the development of linguistic theory³.” The term “linguo-stylistics” is often used in relation to linguistic stylistics. U. Lehtsalu, G. Liiv and O. Mutt (ibid., p. 13) submit that “linguo-stylistics ... helps to shed light on a number of linguistic problems, such as lexical and grammatical synonymy,

the semantic structure of words and phrase, etc. Linguo-stylistics and literary stylistics complement each other and together they constitute what may be called general stylistics.”

5. CONCLUSION

In literary and non-literary texts, language use is subjected to stylistic analysis. The task before the analyst is to disclose the features that account for sentential and extra-sentential meanings. Stylistics is about a writer’s communicative strategies. Therefore, stylistic analysis is applicable to a wide range of discourse genres. Simpson (2004: 2-3) states that the preferred study in stylistics is literary text, but many forms of discourse (advertising, journalism, poplar music – even casual conversation) often display a high degree of stylistic scope. Now, the study of stylistics ... is being more flexible and applicable.” Fundamentally, stylistics is the study of language and style. Literature and linguistic approaches are the instruments for investigating writers’ language and style. Style is immersed in “communicative competence” rather than “linguistic competence”. This study examines different perspectives in stylistics and concludes that stylistics is objective, rule-governed, individualistic, classificatory and extra-linguistic.

Notes

1. These authors also submit that “stress and intonation are important stylistic devices in the spoken language where they are expressed directly by the speaker. In the written language they are conveyed indirectly by graphical means and by the special syntactical arrangement of utterances (e.g. inversion, detachment, parallel constructions, etc.).”
2. Woravit Kitjaroenpaiboon and Kanyarat Getkham (ibid.) assert that “traditional figures of speech include schemes and tropes. According to Leech and Short (ibid., p. 66), schemes are defined as ‘foregrounded repetitions of expressions and tropes as ‘foregrounded irregularities of content’. There are some categories of schemes i.e. phonological schemes, grammatical shemes, and lexical schemes ... Phonological schemes contain phonological patterns of rhyme, alliteration and assonance while grammatical and lexical schemes contain formal and structural repetition (such as anaphora and parallelism) and mirror-image patterns (chaisms) ... tropes also contain traditional poetic figures of speech and their special interpretations.”
3. Ronald Carter and Paul Simpson (ibid.) also notes submit that “linguistic stylisticians believe that in the analysis of language there are dangers in compromising the rigour and systematicity of analysis of stylistic effects, and that practitioners in related disciplines are unwilling to accept the kind of standards of principled description of language necessary to a genuinely mutual integration of interests ... the most recent studies in linguistic stylistics have tended to focus on application of studies in discourse analysis and narrative organization to the study of literary text.”

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