



Linguistic Approach in The Study of Literature

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ABSTRACT

Research on the language of literature has a long tradition under the rubric of philology. This unity of concerns has lapsed as linguistics has become independent and linguistic training for literary scholars has been virtually eliminated. Still, the linguistic revolution of the last four decades has produced substantial work by linguists in prose style, narrative, metrics, poetic syntax, and metaphor.

Keywords:

Language, literature, linguists, style, function.

Some of the most powerful arguments against practical criticism in the past few years have come from that branch of linguistic and literary study known as stylistics. For all its emphasis on a close reading of the text, practical criticism seemed to assume that the relationship between language and reality was essentially stable and unproblematic. Literary texts were therefore seen to 'reflect' the way things were, and this idea of 'mimeses or imitation was taken for granted. Linguists, however, argued that such criticism encouraged students to produce an impressionistic response to the text, based on a generalized notion of the human condition and a simplistic model of how language communicates meaning. Ronald Carter was among those who voiced a concern about the shortcomings of practical criticism: 'Meaning is measured against an ostensibly common life experience; there is only minimal appeal to the medium from which the text is constructed'). What the study of literary texts requires, in his view, is a more principled analysis and systematic awareness of how language operates in its many different contexts. Whereas practical criticism

concentrates narrowly on the text as a source of meaning, practical stylistics takes as its starting point a much broader knowledge of the rules and conventions of linguistic communication in a variety of situations, both written and spoken. One of the principal effects of stylistics is to 'demystify' the literary text: to see it essentially as 'language in use'.

Style and Textual Function early work in prose style related syntactic patterning to the author's world-view, and, as speech-act theory developed, to the social conventions surrounding literary 'utterances.' The world-view of Ernest Hemingway, action-oriented, stoic, is depicted in the unadorned, unmodified, verb-centered syntax of his prose. As this paradigm crested in North America, functional linguists in Britain and Europe focused on the textual function in literary prose: voice; patterns of related words called 'collocations'; cohesion, or patterns of pronoun reference and specialized language that unify a text; deixis, or the 'pointing' function in language (in English, how using 'this' and 'that' depends on the relative positions of speaker and hearer) and information flow. Functional linguists drew on

the sustained collaboration between linguists and literary theorists in the Linguistic Circle of Prague. Functionalists sought to explain such phenomena as our intuitions that while the collocation 'bailiff', 'prosecutor', 'your honor', and 'voir dire' would be unremarkable in an account of a trial, in a scene between lovers, the collocation 'defendant' and 'cross-examine' would display a motivated prominence, or 'foregrounding'. The text itself, foregrounding some elements, 'automatizing' others, making them seem natural or 'automatic', becomes a meaningful linguistic unit.

Poetic Language and Meter linguistic research on poetic language has centered on meter, syntax, and metaphor. Researchers in generative metrics sought to establish the line as the unit of metrical analysis rather than the traditional poetic foot. On this account, a line of iambic pentameter, for example, would be analyzed not as five iambic feet but as 10 metrical positions, the odd-numbered weak and the even-numbered strong.

Traditional theory could not explain why the syllables '-sions' and 'of' constituted an iambic 'foot,' a sequence of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. Generative metrics claimed that the only stress unit that 'counted' was an entity they called the stress maximum, sequences like 'the sess-,' where a syllable to which the stress rules of English assign primary stress is on an even-numbered position and flanked on both sides by syllables assigned lesser or no stress. The only 'rule,' generativists claimed, was proscriptive. In iambic pentameter, stress maxima could not appear in odd-numbered metrical positions. This 'rule' explains phenomena like the problematic 'foot' 'swéet sí-,' where both syllables of the 'iamb' are stressed. This common 'exception' is no problem for generative metrics. 'Sweet', though stressed, is not a stress maximum because it has an unstressed syllable only to its left.

The stress maximum also explains another common 'exception' in English poetry, the reversed first foot, 'When to'. 'When' does not count as a stress maximum because there is no unstressed syllable but only a line boundary to its left.

This body of research, which is by no means settled, posited natural relationships among a previously random set of 'permissible licenses' to 'strict' iambic pentameter—a phenomenon that indeed rarely occurs. 'Licenses' like pyrrhic, trochaic, and spondaic substitution, headless lines, synaloepha, and diaeresis—which occur so often in poetry that the 'exceptions' nearly outnumber the 'norm'—were shown to be consistent with our knowledge of English phonology and phonetics. Generative metrists synthesized these unrelated 'exceptions' into a perspicuous method for analyzing metrical tension, the extent to which poets depart from the abstract metrical norm. An account of this tension can play a significant role in the analysis of poetic style.

Poetic Language and syntax linguists have used the more powerful analytical tools of generative syntax in close readings of poetry. A syntactic analysis of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan", for example, contests the traditional view of this poem as a fragment, demonstrating that the dislocated syntax at the poem's start, and again as its closing vision takes shape, conclusively resolves into strongly canonical syntactic patterns as the poet finds his voice and subject, poetry and the process of creation. Another study shows that the syntactic patterns of Wallace Stevens' "The Snow Man" require a reanalysis of the poem's sense that constitutes the poem's statement itself. The poem's mind of winter is just the kind of mind that constantly reanalyzes and readjusts its view of reality. In this research, linguists have argued that a poem's syntactic patterns are central to its form.

Literature and Cognitive Metaphor the most recent linguistic approach to literature is that of cognitive metaphor, which claims that metaphor is not a mode of language, but a mode of thought. Metaphors project structures from source domains of schematized bodily or enculturated experience into abstract target domains. We conceive the abstract idea of life in terms of our experiences of a journey, a year, or a day. We do not understand Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" to be about a horse-and-wagon journey but about life. We understand Emily Dickinson's "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" as a poem about the

end of the human life span, not a trip in a carriage. This work is redefining the critical notion of imagery. Perhaps for this reason, cognitive metaphor has significant promise for some kind of rapprochement between linguistics and literary study.

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