Literary Stylistics: An Overview of its Evolution

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What is Stylistics?

- Stylistics has been derived from a French word **Stylistique** – an instrument for Writing.
- A comprehensive definition of stylistics is quite challenging, however Thornborrow & Wareing (1998, p. 4) identify following three key aspects of stylistics.
  - 1 the **use of linguistics** (the study of language) to approach literary texts;
  - 2 the discussion of texts according to **objective criteria** rather than according to purely subjective and impressionistic values;
  - 3 an emphasis on the **aesthetic properties** of language.
Stylistics before 20th Century

- Before 20th century, three major movements can be identified in the evolution stylistics as a discipline.
  - Rhetorical Stylistics
  - Aesthetic Stylistics
  - Individualistic Stylistics
The origin of the concept of style or the early attempt to study style can be traced back to the classical school of rhetoric, which regards style as a part of the technique of persuasion and discusses it under oratory.

This discipline was a set of rules and strategies which enable orators ‘to speak well’; in other words to use language that is fully decorated with all the figures and tropes to bring about changes in the feelings and opinions of the audience.

Rhetoric, Dialectic, and Poetics
Renaissance scholars, compare style to flowers, jewels, embroidery. For Samuel Wesley, it is a ‘dress of thought’. Pope describes stylistics as the equivalent of ‘true wit’, which consists in ‘what oft was thought, but never so well expressed’ and other definition as well. All these definitions or descriptions reflect an artificial and ornamental view of style.

Gradually, such a discipline expanded from rhetoric to incorporate other linguistic discourses (genres).
They concentrated their literary efforts on elements such as diction, metaphors, images and symbols, utilized for embellishing the subject matter of a given piece of literary work.

That is, great importance was given to the choice and artistic arrangement of words. In this sense, such a practice is seen as aesthetic stylistics as it is ornamental in its approach. It is an extension, which asserts the dogma that sees the special use of language as ‘the dress of thought.’
There is a revival of Cicero’s conception of style as “an expression of personality.” (Atkins 1952: 31). This way of entertaining the language of literature is known as individual stylistics.

In turn, this tendency stimulated linguists to entertain the different, individual uses in literary discourse - the way in which a writer expresses himself. The study of language variations was then accentuated by the emergence of modern linguistics in the late 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.
Stylistics after 20th Century

- Under the impetus of certain theoretical developments in Russia and Europe, Stylistics has seen the following trends in 20th Century.

  - Expressive Stylistics
  - Psychological Stylistics
  - Formalist Stylistics
  - New & Practical Criticism informed Stylistics
  - Reader-response Stylistics
At the turn of 20th century, language studies triggered the birth of a new discipline, which stands in direct opposition to the approaches that sees literature as the outcome of the extrinsic properties of historical, cultural and biographical factors to the exclusion of the linguistic form. It is Charles Bally, a Geneva linguist whose work in stylistics developed out of a Saussurian thought, who gave the impetus to such systematic studies with the publication of his Traité de Stylistique.
Bally stresses on the role of expressiveness in language and the function of language in interaction as they have the task of communicating thought.

In Bally, emphasis is placed primarily on the choices of ‘emotive and expressive’ elements of language.

The affective and expressive qualities are achieved by “a judicious choice in the lexicon and, to a lesser degree, in the syntax; the two types of effects possess forms that are identical with respect to the expression of thought but have different affective expressivity.” (Ducrot & Todorov 1979: 76).
Inspired by the works of Charles Bally, Leo Spitzer, a practitioner of modern stylistics, initiated a new line of stylistic enquiry. He developed a new stylistic approach, which accounts for the habitual uses and choices made by the author. It is an approach which establishes correlation between the style of a literary work and the psyche of the author.
According to Spitzer, by studying the stylistic properties, one can grasp the worldview of the author. He postulates that: ‘The only way,’ to discover the inner traits ‘is to read and reread, patiently and confidently, in an endeavor to become, as it were, soaked through and through with the atmosphere of the work.’ Then, ‘suddenly, one word, one line stands out,’ making ‘the characteristic click ... which is the indication that detail and whole have found a common denominator.’ (Spitzer 1967: 27).
In the second decade of the 20th century, another alternative to the study of literary language which emerged as a reaction to the more prescriptive or mechanistic exercises is known as the Russian Formalism.

This movement revolutionised against the traditional, romantic trends in the study of literature. Distrustful of all the previous theories of language, the formalist method emphasised that the study of language should confine itself to the explication of the formal linguistic features of a literary text.
In other words, the proponents of this movement take the poetic language as the object of their inquiry; the text and only the text should be considered, and no other considerations of social, historical, ideological or biographical approaches are entertained.

‘The locus of the peculiarly literary,’ Erlich 1981 states, ‘was to be sought not in the author’s or reader’s psyche but in the work itself.’
Formalistic Stylistics: A Linguistic Approach

- The Formalist movement, Harkins (1951: 178) asserts, was: dissatisfied with the hegemony of the neogrammarian approach in linguistics and with prevailing eclecticism in literary theory.

- Such eclecticism had led to the study of literature by a number of different disciplines, philosophy, psychology, sociology, philology, cultural history, etc., each of which imposing its methods on literary scholarships, had found that literature was only a reflection of its own content.
Formalist Stylistics: Concepts

Defamiliarization

- Shklovsky, views literature as the totality of the formal devices employed in a work of art. He also expressed the independence of the literary language in his article ‘Art as Technique’ where he announced the term of ‘defamiliarization’ or ‘making strange’ as a key concept and a manifesto in literary theory as the principle in the function of art ‘is to make people aware of the world in a fresh way.’ (Peer 1986: 1).
Havránek also believes that the standard language has different functions to perform: intellectualisation, automatisation and foregrounding, each of which is determined by linguistic devices which are generated by the purpose or function of the utterance. The two worthy contrastive qualities in the use of language in this functional differentiation are: automatisation and foregrounding.
Formalist Stylistics: Concepts

- **Automatisation** refers to the use of linguistic devices for a communicative, informative purpose without any attempt to attract the attention as the social greetings, for example.

- **Foregrounding**, on the other hand, means the use of foregrounded, linguistic devices that make the expression stand out as uncommon such as the poetic expression, as can be found in e.e. cumming’s ‘he danced his did.’

- Functional Style (Parole) and Functional Language (Langue)
Mukarovsky (1964) asserts, in his influential work ‘Standard Language and Poetic Language,’ that the poetic use of language, unlike the standard language, manifested by the foregrounding devices has to deautomatise perception and hence achieve surprise: Foregrounding is the opposite of automatization, that is, the deautomatization of an act; the more an act is automatized, the less it is consciously executed; the more it is foregrounded, the more completely conscious does it become.
Functions of Language

Jakobson, the major representative of the Prague circle, argues in his most influential paper, ‘Linguistics and Poetics’ that: Poetics deals primarily with the question, What makes a verbal message a work of art? Because the main subject of poetics is the differentia specifica of verbal art in relation to other arts and in relation to other kinds of verbal behavior, poetics is entitled to the leading place in literary studies (1960: 350) (Poetics, in this context, refers to stylistics).
Formalist Stylistics: Concepts

Functions of Language

- According to Jakobson (1960), there are numerous factors involved in any linguistic act and which are central to the successful achievement of a message and without which a message is incomplete. These numerous factors are set towards: the addresser, the addressee, message, context, code, and contact.
- That is, these factors correspond to the six functions which language performs in any successful communicative act. Each of which stands dominant if the emphasis is placed upon one of the linguistic functions and similarly determines ‘the verbal structure of a message.’
Jakobson’s Functions of Language

- Context
- Addressee
- Message
- Addressee
- Contact
- Code
- Referential
- Poetic
- Conative
- Emotive
- Phatic
- Metalingual
Jakobson’s Principle of Equivalence

Principle of Equivalence

- The ‘literariness’, which Jakobson stresses in the poetic use of language, involves two modes of ordering: ‘selection’ and ‘combination’ and these are considered to be fundamentally of stylistic significance.
- This set toward the linguistic features is achieved through the unique way poetic language is constructed:
  - “The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination.’ (ibid: 358).
These method is concerned exclusively with the description of the literary texts particularly poetry. It is a kind of close reading, similar to the French Explication De Texte, where the critic makes a claim about the theme or effect of the text and then quotes a word, a line or a passage to strengthen his argument.

The names most associated with the movement are Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, and I.A Richards.
Admittedly, New critical school derives its theoretical background from the textbased approach known as Practical Criticism, advocated by I. A. Richards (1924, 1929), whose doctrine accentuating the significance of the language of the text over its author in the study of literary works. These two movements, though almost identical in theory, are different in approach whereas New Criticism is of a descriptive nature as it concerns itself with describing texts, Practical Criticism is of a psychological background for its search of the psychological effects drawn from the readers interacting with the text.
Riffaterre argues that the poetic message resides in the impression created by the reader whose role is neglected in such studies.

Therefore, he sees style not as an objective reality conveyed by linguistic structures but as an impression subjectively constructed in the mind of the addressee (reader).

His argument is that: “the literary phenomenon is a dialectic between text and reader.” (1978: 1). And any purely linguistic, structural description of style will pass no distinction between the stylistic and the linguistic aspects of a message.
According to Riffaterre, any analysis of style should pay attention not only to the text but to ‘the whole act of communication’ of which the reader is an essential constituent. Stylistics, Riffaterre defines, as that which: studies the act of communication not as merely producing a verbal chain, not as bearing the imprint of the speaker’s personality, and as compelling the addressee’s attention.

To delineate the stylistic devices, Riffaterre argues, the feedback of the reader has to be taken to full consideration. In other words, the analysis of a literary text and its stylistic devices cannot be dissociated from the reader’s response.
Thanks