RADICAL STYLISTICS: YET ANOTHER EPITHET?[1]

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Introduction

An investigation into the history of stylistics will reveal that definitions have had short lives, mostly because stylistics has tended to be narrowly defined. Very few studies have attempted to integrate all the multiple approaches into one large and flexible model (cf. Carter, 1989). As a result, stylistics has been sitting uncomfortably between linguistics and literature and questions about its validity remain in every theoretician's agenda.

These questions are not new. Twenty one years ago Fish (1973) asked what stylistics was and why people were saying such terrible things about it. Here he maintained that stylisticians could collect relevant data but were still unable to justify the interpretation of these data. The scientific method proposed failed when it came to interpretation, which remained arbitrary. Fish added that the reason for this gap between data gathering and interpretation was that stylisticians dissociated the inventory of data from the activities of reading. He called this "the basic manoeuvres in the stylistics game" (p.73) or "the establishing of an inventory in which formal items will be linked in a fixed relationship to semantic and psychological values" (p.75).

Many different models were subject to Fish's criticism: Milic's structural approach, the transformational-generative principles of Thorne, Halliday's category-scale description, the statistical efforts of Dolezel, and Ohmann's understanding of speech act theory. Riffaterre's theory of reading as an act of communication nearly escaped Fish's criticism because Riffaterre had included the reader at some point in his argument.

However, Fish never denies that a text is made of meaningful formal structures. He is only reluctant about assuming that these structures are preconceived. To him, stylistics depends on instantial meaning, which is installed by the reader only during the act of reading. He writes: "...the value a formal feature may acquire in the context of a reader's concerns and expectations is local and temporary" (p.95).

What this example shows is that in questioning the validity of stylistics and in creating another epithet to accompany it, in this case, the term "affective" (Fish, 1970), Fish is not doing away with stylistics. Rather, he is adding a further dimension to a highly flexible area. He is extending its boundaries.

Fish is not alone in his criticism. Carter & Walker (1989: 3) point out that most charges arise from the notion that stylistics is only concerned with the words on the page, that it is a-historical, that it disregards the ideological position of the reader, and does not consider the question of the institutionalisation of literature and literary language.

In this paper, rather than question the validity of the term, I hold that the various epithets that have kept company to stylistics (radical, affective, pragmatic, pedagogic, literary, etc.) have in fact created the need for an overall and wider conceptualisation.

Based on the grounds that stylistics was developed to make textual interpretations more substantiated, I will argue that it has been prone to criticism due to its interdisciplinary nature. Because it establishes a bridge between the areas of language and literature, stylistics has been under attack by both linguists and literary critics.[2] Eco (in Collini 1992)

explains that the Romans considered bridges sacrilegious because they spanned the *sulcus*, the moat of water delineating the city boundaries. This is specifically what stylistics does — it transgresses limits.

How radical is radical stylistics?

One of the first scholars to use the term **radical stylistics** was Burton (1982), who proposed "a radical rethinking of the contribution that stylisticians could be making to society" (1982:198). As I see it, this statement does not necessarily do away with the term. What it does is question the various uses stylistics has been put to so far. By choosing the *not just but* structure in her statement that "stylistic analysis is *not* just a question of discussing 'effects' in language and text, but a powerful method for understanding the ways in which all sorts of 'realities' are constructed through language" (idem: 201), Burton implicitly strengthens and expands the field. That is, discussing the structure and the effects of linguistic choices does not necessarily clash with looking into the various ideologies this language may encode. Language is a patterned event and the perception of patterns is a condition *sine qua non* common to all textual approaches. What varies are the types of patterns perceived and the meanings attributed to them. Therefore, it is not stylistics that it radical. What is radical is the reading one can make of the text.

What, then, is new?

That texts are meant to be interpreted dates as far back as the advent of writing. Eco (in Collini, 1992) shows that the history of interpretation has generated two models which are still represented today. On one hand stands the rationalist method, branching from the Greek Rationalists, which tries to arrive at meaning based on causes and consequences.[3] On the other hand, hermeticism follows a model which argues for the elusive nature of texts. To the followers of Hermetic interpretations, truth is what cannot be explained.[4]

Although they have followed different routes, these two trends can nowadays claim a common ground. Since Saussure, one of the great revolutions in the history of interpretation has been the privileging of

the signifier over the signified. Both models have stopped searching for meaning in an abstract ideal world and have looked instead into the different meanings produced by the language of the text, of how language builds or traps conceptions and representations.

This explains why the discussions on finding criteria for interpreting the linguistic clues in a text have come to the foreground. How far can one go in asking questions, in spotting clues which are plausible? What does the word *plausibility* involve? Who validates it?

It may be argued that any critical statement presupposes a set of criteria. However, these may not necessarily be clearly stated. The history of taste bears witness to the fact that validation has always occurred but criteria have remained hidden under labels such as "commonsense" or "tradition". Disagreement over criteria has, for instance, generated a debate between Eco and Rorty (in Collini, 1992). A pragmatist philosopher, Rorty claims that it is the use that one makes of the text which validates it. Eco, a follower of structuralism, insists that texts have properties which will restrict their use and the way they can be interpreted. Perhaps influenced by Wittgenstein's analogy of language to a toolbox, they bring a screwdriver into the argument. To Rorty, its meaning derives from its use, that is, to drive screws in or out. Eco, however, claims that objects cannot be validated only by their function. A screwdriver can be put to unpredictable uses, like scratching one's ear, which does not necessarily contribute to the meaning of the tool. In addition, the object has properties which cannot be disregarded. A screwdriver cannot hold ashes nor does it serve to pour water.

What can be concluded from the discussion between these two critics is that both the linguistic properties of the text and the way the text is put to use are essential interpretive criteria. If we accept that language is patterned, then it is the perception of these patterns in use which validates one's interpretation.

Planes of Meaning

Whatever the representation or the application the critic makes of stylistics, a wider definition should consider text and context together, interacting in a meaningful and unified way. Based on Firth's notion of a spectrum of meaning, I propose the following diagram to explain how an interpretation can be valited:
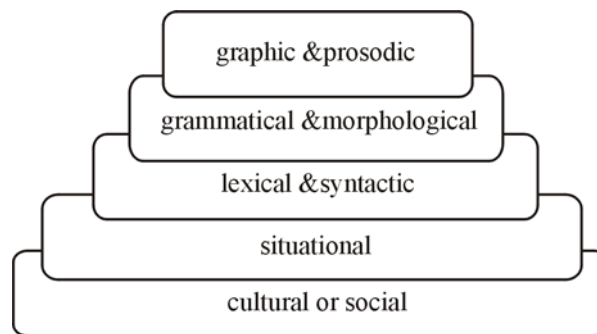

Diagram 1. Planes of meaning

According to this diagram, texts are multidimensional structures and must be analysed as such. These five planes have been artificially discriminated and set in a hierarchical order here for the purposes of the argument. In real life they occur together and cannot be dissociated.

The widest plane consists of the cultural context, or the sociocultural background, ruled by ideologies, or what is also known as "the world outside the text". This plane extends meaning beyond the text. It can account, for instance, for the different receptions a text may have had, or what kind of repertoire a certain reader brings to the act of reading, or whether any cultural notes are needed for a non-native reader's understanding of references (cf. Carter & Long, 1991).

The situational plane comprehends meaning above sentence level. It may be called "the world of the text". This plane allows us to study one text in isolation, and to carry out an intratextual analysis, or draw comparisons, that is, to work on the intertextual level.

On the lexical and syntactic plane, focus is given to "collocation", or "actual words in habitual company" (Firth, 1968:182), and "colligation", or the syntagmatic relation between words. The "mutual expectancy" which collocation and colligation generate can be relevant to stylistic studies. Sinclair (1991:170) points out that they "can be dramatic and interesting because unexpected".

The grammatical and morphological plane consists of word formation, including prefixes, suffixes, etc. The graphic and prosodic plane includes phonology and phonetics. On the graphic level, marks printed on the page, strings of letters, and blank spaces stand in a syntagmatic relation to each other and are read as symbols. This plane is particularly relevant to the study of concrete poetry.

This diagram then accommodates the notion of multiplicity of interpretation. It explains how the same text can be read differently by readers who have different repertoires. Interpretation is an interpersonal and an intracultural event. Each community will hold its own terms of validation. But how can communities transcend cultural, linguistic and conceptual barriers? This diagram proposes a polysystemic description of meaning, the construction of which involves a network of complex contextual relations. Any statement which travels consistently and coherently through the five textual planes, described above, can be considered a valid interpretation.

The Contribution of Stylistics

By s*tylistics* I mean the study of the nature of those linguistic patterns that are potentially present in all texts and which have local, instantial meaning. These linguistic patterns are not conventionally meaningful but are in some circumstances capable of being interpreted as meaningful. Stylistics investigates the use of these patterns in meaning. This definition assumes that language is the medium and necessary condition for the existence of literature. Notwithstanding the different approaches, linguistic criteria will always be relevant to a

substantiated interpretation. And because language can be defined in different ways, stylistics will necessarily be used in different ways.

The following model assumes that stylistics is a discipline which promotes a colloquy between language and literature and tries to account for instances when bridges are crossed.
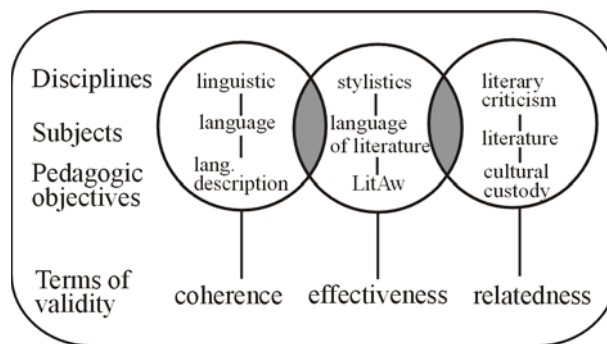

Diagram 2. The place of stylistics

This diagram proposes three separate disciplines with three different objectives but with overlapping areas. The aim of linguistics is to "show how language works" (Halliday, 1966:67), that is, to describe a system. In schools and universities, it is a discipline taken up by language teachers or linguists, who may describe the language for different purposes. They often discuss the theoretical implications of different descriptions.

Literary criticism engages in the study of generic, ideological, historical, or intertextual frameworks in order to evaluate and validate cultural manifestations. It may materialise in literature classes which deal, for instance, with facts about the literary world or where symbolic and mythological themes are discussed. Its main interest resides in those works which have been acclaimed valuable by a certain group of people and it draws intertextual relations that may not necessarily be covered by stylistics (Sinclair, 1982b: 16). Literary criticism is performed by the literature teacher and/or scholar.[5]

Linguistics and literary criticism are validated by terms of coherence and relatedness, that is, how acceptable or suitable a certain description or interpretation is to certain pre-established models.

Stylistics deals with interpretative processes aiming at a sensitised reading. It investigates details of particular texts, how certain patterns have aesthetic, emotional, and epistemic functions. Hence, its term of validity is not appropriateness or acceptability but effectiveness. It can explain the reactions a certain text may provoke in a reader. It can also reveal how the persuasive power of language works and how certain choices weave the ideological mesh which supports the text. Stylistics can be fully materialised in Literary Awareness classes (Zyngier, forthcoming). It is also very relevant to English as a Foreign Literature students to whom "the language is not a native tongue, and for those not already sensitive to the craft and effects of different ways with words, stylistics is an aid in the grasp of certain kinds of structuring, craft, and effect" (Toolan, 1990:42).

Besides considering linguistics, stylistics, and literary criticism as three distinctive disciplines, Diagram 2 also reveals shaded areas where the disciplines overlap. This means that insofar as linguistics and literary criticism take patterns of text and invest them with local meaning, they are also dealing with applications of stylistics. For instance, when linguists like Kress and Hodge (1979) discuss the ideology of the language of newspapers and Cook (1992) looks into the language of advertisement, or Fairclough (1989:110-111) lists certain questions to reveal the ideological incline of a text, they are bringing stylistic concerns into genres other than literature. They investigate parts of the text in relation to language as a system in order to find out how the text came to be what it is. That is, they are making stylistic comments in linguistic terms. This is the area of action of "radical stylistics".

By the same token, when literary critics, like post-structuralists (e.g. Derrida, 1978; Barthes, 1974) or, to some extent, the New Critics (see Belsey's criticism, 1980, 1991: 15-20), after considering the entire

text, turn to an observation of the word in order to come to terms with an interpretation, they are entering the area of stylistics. Literary critics may not work in a systematically organised or disciplined way but they are applying stylistics when they base their interpretation on the language of the text.

In short, linguistics investigates language as a system and as part of a culture, literary criticism questions, discusses and/or maintains the cultural custody of texts, and stylistics studies what language can do, how it can be patterned to create certain effects, and how choices are culturally-dependent.

Concluding Remarks

Fowler (1991: 68) points out that "linguistic theory exists in several different models, which have widely divergent goals and terminologies. These linguistic theories simply do different jobs". Hence, as stylistics began to incorporate more developments in linguistics, it came to be defined according to the perspectives the interpreter held about language, resulting in a multiplication of epithets. To structuralists like Jakobson, it investigates the text in relation to one system of signifiers; to generativists like Levin and Thorne, it consists in looking into the deep and surface structures; to Halliday, it offers a functional network; to MacCabe, it reveals the ideology encoded in the language. However, divergence in application does not necessarily mean disruption of the concept. On the contrary, the various applications can be regarded as a healthy movement towards consolidation. It is not stylistics which is radical, mentalist, pedagogical, literary, etc. These are its applications. Any attempt to redefine stylistics must include a clear statement of the understanding.

Notwithstanding the most rigorous critiques of stylistics, one cannot escape the fact that one is dealing with a language-based study. No matter how the critic approaches the text, the perception of stylistic patterns still remains the necessary condition for a tangible discussion.

This condition lies at the heart of all textual approaches and justifies the actuality of stylistics.

Notes

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2   This opposition becomes very clear when decisions on what to include in the curriculum must be made.

3   To some extent, the structuralist approach of the fifties and sixties belong to this tradition.

4   Symbolists in general and Deconstructionists like Derrida and De Man have followed this model in one way or another. They are in line with the Nietzschean orientation which puzzles over the unsolvable aporias of the text — its paradoxes, contradictions and mysteries.

5   See Fowler (1986:178): "The linguistic critic, unlike many literary critics, is not concerned simply to reproduce dominant values, but to come to a reflexive understanding of the values of a time and a culture".

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