

DOING STYLISTIC ANALYSIS: SOME FUNDAMENTAL TECHNIQUES

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If you're new to stylistics it's often difficult to know where to begin when attempting a stylistic analysis. Analyzing a text stylistically is unlike doing a 'literary' analysis as it needs to be much more objective and rooted in the researcher's knowledge of linguistics. With stylistics we aim to explain how the words of a text create the feelings and responses that we get when we read them. What I aim to do here is to demonstrate how to conduct a stylistic analysis of a literary text. I will try to show how such an analysis can be completed [1].

Stylistic analysis in linguistics refers to the identification of patterns of usage in speech and writing. In some forms of stylistic analysis, the numerical recurrence of certain stylistic features is used to make judgments about the nature and the quality of the writing [2]. Among many techniques and terms we use while doing a stylistic analysis, foregrounding is particularly important in stylistic analysis. Leech and Short (1981: 48) define foregrounding as an 'artistically motivated deviation'. According to Mukarovsky, foregrounding, the opposite of automaticity in a text, refers to the range of stylistic effects that occur in literature, whether at the phonetic level (e.g., alliteration, rhyme), the grammatical level (e.g., inversion, ellipsis), or the semantic level (e.g., metaphor, irony) all of which violate the scheme of the text [3].

While studying a literary text from a stylistic perspective, we should start reading the text to understand the overall picture. Then, we should start dissecting the text by looking at peculiar and eye-catching peculiarities.

According to McIntyre [4] here are a few points to consider (a set of questions to answer) while analyzing a text from a stylistic perspective:

1. Does the text contain some striking irregularities of form in comparison to traditional texts that are within the same genre?
2. Are there deviant grammatical or graphological elements?
3. Despite all deviant characteristics, is there order in the text?
4. How about the text's phonological qualities? Are some sounds repeated? Are there some sounds missing?
5. Are there neologisms or awkward word usage? Does the author use jargon, slang, or standard language?
6. Semantic fields are especially important while analyzing a text stylistically. For example, can you categorize the words in different semantic fields? What kind of feeling do the verbs give? By looking at the verbs, do you get the feeling of the past or do they point at an ongoing activity?
7. In conclusion, are the linguistic features of the text directly related to the overall or particular meanings reached?

Sample Analyses

Let's read the first stanza Oliver Wendell Holmes' poem titled "Contentment" and apply our knowledge of linguistics to our analysis:

Little I ask; my wants are few;
I only wish a hut of stone,
(A *very plain* brown stone will do,) That I may call my own;—
And close at hand is such a one,
In yonder street that fronts the sun.

Our first reading of this stanza shows, through the declarative first sentence, that the poet has "few wants," not many. Setting aside the fact that the word "want" is mostly used as a verb in daily language, the poet uses it as a noun, which might signal his foregrounding. So, with this declarative sentence, we realize that the poet will, most probably, write his "few" wants such as "a hut of stone." However, as we read, we realize that the poet has specific qualities

he ascribes to that hut such as the hut should be of stone, a very plain stone will do, that he may call his own, close at hand, in yonder street, fronts the sun. Hence, although semantically his wants are few, that is he does not expect much, indeed he has a detailed image of his hut with many qualities which makes his “wants” not so “few.” Here we may focus on the nouns used by the poet to add a different dimension to our reading. As the underlined words (nouns) show, the word “wants” is the only plural noun given in the poem which signals the poet’s foregrounding in a special way.

When the graphology of the text is considered, it can be seen that the third line gives us some parenthetical information, that is, some further information about the poet’s previous thoughts or feelings. Here, what is written between the parentheses “A *very plain* brown stone will do,” gives us further information about the “hut of stone” he wishes. We realize that his hut should be made of a “very plain brown stone” which suggests that the poet whose “wants are few” actually demands a hut made of not stone, not brown stone, not plain stone, but “a very plain brown stone.” Hence, studying the graphology of a text, as was argued above, makes it understandable that stylistic analysis of a poem helps us gain further insight about the meanings we attain from a literary text by looking at the organic system of a text itself.

Parallel to the findings mentioned above, a closer reading will also show us that, in fact, the poet has more than “few” wants:

Jewels are bawbles; ‘t is a sin

...

A ruby, and a pearl, or so,
Will do for me;- I laugh at show.

Another example I would like share is the opening sentences of Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Cask of Amontillado*. The reliability of the narrator has been a matter of discussion in the literature. Studying the opening lines from a

grammatical perspective will reveal that the narrator is less likely to be called a reliable narrator:

THE thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge. You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that gave utterance to a threat. At length I would be avenged; this was a point definitely, settled --but the very definitiveness with which it was resolved precluded the idea of risk. I must not only punish but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong.

The narrator starts in the simple past tense, but then continues by using the present forms mainly because what is written refers to a general truth. It is known that the simple present tense also is used when “the information is a general truth” or “the information is not dependent upon time” (Myers-Shaffer, 2000: 262-263). Hence, the narrator uses present forms to rationalize or justify his “revenge.” Thus, the sentence “I must not only punish but punish with impunity” splits the narrative by switching from the past, completed actions to the “general truth,” so to say, which is only written as a general truth by means of the use of grammar. Hence, the narrator rationalizes his personal assumption about taking revenge through his use of grammar which makes the reliability of the narrator open to discussion.

Another interesting element about this paragraph is that the author performs verbal economy, or brevity, in the sentences that follow each other. Verbal economy, as a stylistic strategy, functions so as to “explain or describe more by using less words” (Özünlü, 2015). Each of these sentences (“I must not only punish but punish with impunity” and “A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser” contains nine words which are the shortest sentences in the whole paragraph. Interestingly, the shortest sentence that follows these two contains 20 words. This may point at the possibility that the author gave special importance to the ideas hidden

in these sentences since he clearly performed verbal economy (brevity) to make these two statements more direct.

Conclusion

Literary texts are nothing but words put together with at least one purpose. Hence, analyzing this special structure by paying close attention to that production with our grammatical and linguistic knowledge will foster our understanding. In that sense, stylistics can be beneficial while uncovering the hidden yet visible aspects of a literary text.

References

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- Myers-Shaffer, C. (2000). *The principles of literature: A guide for readers and writers*. New York: Barron's.
- Özünü, Ü. (2015). Özlü deyiş ve karşıtları. 15th International stylistics, language and literature symposium, Antalya, October 1-3, 2015.

Web Resources

- [1] <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/projects/stylistics/sa1/example.htm>
- [2] <http://www.mantex.co.uk/2009/09/13/english-language-stylistic-analysis/>
- [3] <http://staff.uny.ac.id/sites/default/files/STYLISTICS%20FOREGROUNDING.pdf>
- [4] McIntyre, D. <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/projects/stylistics/sa1/example.htm>