Research Paper Literature

Multifarious Approaches to Stylistic Interpretation of Poetry

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ABSTRACT

This research paper opens with the introduction to stylistic theory as stylistics is the description and analysis of the variability of linguistic forms in actual language use. This introduction is followed by a brief survey of stylistics with its two types of stylistics and various approaches in stylistics practices by many stylisticians. Various approaches have been shown in action with illustrative examples and also their unique findings yielding coupling, foregrounding, two types of equivalences, two axes, etc.

KEYWORDS Stylistics, myriad approaches, stylistic terms, cohesion, foregrounding.

Stylistics is the description and analysis of the variability of linguistic forms in actual language use. It is the study of style used in literary and verbal language, and the effect the writer/speaker wishes to communicate to the reader/hearer. Literary stylistics is an approach which has affinities with literary criticism and history. It is a kind practiced by Leo Spitzer and his followers in the 1940s. This approach is more subjective than objective, literary than linguistic, and it advocates no rigid methodology. It is based on philosophical idealism: a literary work is intuited as a whole and there is no scope of applying external categories to the work of art. Spitzer claims that the critic grasps the "spiritual etymon" of a literary work by an intuitive "click", and thus understands the "inner form". So the importance of the concrete linguistic form is diminished here and emphasis is laid on the 'spirit' or psychological attitude. The inner form should be grasped first in order to determine the 'outer form', which relates the whole to the parts.

Linguistics stylistics is another approach which applies linguistic criteria to the study of literature. It can be broadly divided into three types:

those that treat style as a deviation from the norm,

those that emphasize recurrence or convergence of textual patterns and

those that concentrate on a particular exploitation of a grammar of possibilities.

The work of the Prague School of Linguistics emphasizing 'foregrounding' is an example of the first type. Having in mind the norm in terms of Hallidays's lexical sets, stylisticians like Leech, Jakobson, Enkvist, Fowler and Widdowson subscribe to the view that literature can deviate from the norm of language. And these various kinds of deviation can involve departures from expectations at different levels of language, viz., phonological, lexical, grammatical, and semantic and different ranks within phonology and grammar. Studies dealing with chain and choice, relations and cohesion, and Levin's coupling exemplify the second type of approach that emphasize recurrence or convergence of textual patterns. Some of the transformational approaches to style worked by Richard Ohmann and Thorne illustrate the third type that concentrates on a particular exploitation of a grammar of possibilities.

There are myriad approaches in stylistic analysis. The multifarious approaches to stylistic interpretation of poetry are as follows:

Peer analyses six poems of different modern poets. He attempts to formulate a descriptive procedure which is ''as objective as possible", and which allows for a maximum of inter subjective control, rather than any objectivity in an ''absolute" sense. He agrees with Fowler's opinion that linguistics is not a kind of automatic analyzing device which, fed with a text, will churn out a description without human intervention. The identification of the different types of foregrounding is carried out in three successive stages, corresponding to three conventional levels of linguistic description: phonology, grammar and semantics.

Ross adopts a different strategy of analysis to bring out the difference between Yeats' ''Sailing to Byzantium" and ''Byzantium". Both the poems are by the same author; they belong to the same period of composition, and are of the same genre (short-stanzaic poems) and similar theme. But the former poem is simpler than the latter one. Ross employs frequency count of sounds, words, clauses, syntactic patterns, etc. to distinguish the degrees of the complexity of the poems.

Sinclair's contribution is more theoretical for his main thrust is towards a coherent methodology and theory for stylistics in general. He argues for a sensible understanding of the nature of stylistic analysis as "extreme positions of subjectivity and objectivity, both fail to account for the meaningful patterning of a literary text, or indeed any text at all"; an awareness of a probable total inventory of linguistic and textual conventions, shared in some measure by all uses of language, literary or otherwise; the need for an adequate theory of literary communication, on the basis of which individual practical stylistic analysis can be undertaken an evaluated; and a particular marking out of points of interest in a text, where linguistic detail and literary interpretation clearly come together. He terms such points 'focusing categories', or 'focats' for short.

Sinclair focuses on Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey", and makes acute observations and a convincing analysis in terms of concepts like 'arrest' (the way in which our expectations are held up rather than utilized) and 'extension' (the way structures are unexpectedly expanded). These two concepts can be seen to operate at various linguistic levels in the poem.

Quirk takes Elizabeth Jennings' poem ''Ghosts" for analysis. As a prelude to the actual analysis, Quirk examined some of the devices of syntax which can show that the attempt to begin a discourse with strangers is not really a starting point, but a continuation of discourse. Quirk also illustrates some of the focusing and scoping devices used by authors in different circumstances. Against this background, he shows that ''Ghosts" begins abruptly implying a preceding unspoken argument. The very first word, the deictic relate to inversions, and the scop-

ing relates to the use of negatives.

Greeenbaum takes up Milton's ''Sonnet 19" for analysis to show that syntax can mimic effectively 'the thought processes" of the speaker- that it can symbolize the speaker's mental experience. For example, the syntax in the first stanza is very much involved, elaborate and second stanza, syntax realigns itself to normalcy, indicating perhaps the resolution of the crisis; thus syntax here reflects the narrator's mental process.

Nguyen offers an analysis of Sylvia Plath's poem ''Fever 103". As the title indicates the analysis restricts itself, by and large, to the sematic patterns of the poem. The author stresses that words have four types of semantic features: denotative, connotative, contextual and relational. By repeating the semantic features of words in different points of a text, the poet can lend coherence to his work. Nguyen also identifies the contexts where selectional rules have been violated in the poem creating metaphors. Such exclusive orientation towards semantics exposes the weakness of this approach.

O'Neal explores the intimate relationship between syntax, theme and structures in the poetry of Ernest Dowson. The poem, he states, presents to the reader a tissue of argumentation mirrored effectively in syntax. He points out the salient features of Dowson's poems: the use of parallelism, density of phrasal-structures, tense, mood and voice. Here the structures reflect the atmosphere and mood of the poem. The article seems to be an exercise in structural linguistics.

Sunderman analyses Dylan Thomas's poem ''A Refusal to Mourn" to give a semantic and syntactic interpretation. It is a beautiful example for the exploration of the interrelation between linguistics and literature. Sunderman tries to apply to the poem the concept called ''coupling in a Shakespearean sonnet". The convergence of the '-ing' forms at the beginning of the poem illustrates this point. However, the analyst finds it difficult to apply the same yardstick to the rest of the poem. This is a significant analysis for three other reasons: it takes into account (1) the contexts where sectional rules have been violated to foreground the context; (2) the importance of homogenous images to unify the poem; (3) historical, sociological material wherever necessary to justify the analysis. It is therefore an eclectic kind of analysis.

Rodger suggests how one might adopt a stylistic approach in the classroom to a widely popular but somewhat enigmatic poem by W.H. Auden, ''O Where Are You Going?" Rodger does not offer the basis for an interpretation by an examination of foregrounded features of language. He analyses almost every word in the ballad in detail with respect to the grammatical system, poetic form and the network of meanings released by all the words in the poem as a whole. His interpretation is comprehensive and substantiated with an appeal to a working knowledge of the linguistic facts. It is a lucid, detailed and close examination, and it concentrates on pedagogical stylistics from a pragmatic angle.

Geoffrey Leech aims at relating linguistic description with critical interpretation, and at showing how the latter can benefit from the former. He points out that ''a work of literature contains dimensions of meaning additional to those operating in other types of discourse", and he suggests that for this reason descriptive linguistics cannot simply be applied indifferently as to other types of text. He discusses three features of literary expression representing different 'dimensions of meaning' which are not covered by the normal categories of linguistic description, and illustrates them with reference to the poem of Dylan Thomas. Leech introduces three of his stylistic tools:

Cohesion: This means the intra-textual relations of a grammatical and lexical kind which knits the parts of a text together into a complete unit of discourse and which, therefore, convey the meaning of the text as a whole. Leech points out that cohesion is the unique property of poetry but is a feature of all types of text since it is this which combines separate linguistic units into stretches of meaning discourse.

Foregrounding: This, on the other hand, is a predominantly literary feature. Foregrounding means the deliberate deviation from the rules of the language code or from the accepted conventions of its use which stands out, or is foregrounded, against a background of normal usage.

Cohesion of foregrounding: This means the manner in which deviations in a text are related to each other to form inter-textual patterns. These inter-textual patterns are sometimes formed by the cohesion of the foregrounded expressions.

Jakobson discusses the poetic function of language, which he characterizes as a use of language that concentrates on the actual form of the message itself. He refers to Leech's foregrounding as the setting up of equivalence where equivalences would not normally occur. He refers to the two axes upon which language is organized: the paradigmatic axis or the axis of selection, and the syntagmatic axis or the axis of combination. The setting up of inter-textual equivalences is what Jakobson regards as the defining feature of the poetic function of language: "The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination". The intra-textual equivalences occur at the phonological, semantic and syntactic levels.

Levin develops the notion of equivalence and shows how it operates at the phonological, syntactic and semantic levels to create structural features which distinguish poetry from other kinds of discourse. Levin also has his special types of linguistic patterning. He distinguishes two types of equivalences- positional equivalence and natural equivalence. The third notion he introduces is that of coupling. This is said to occur when one type of equivalence converges with another to produce "the structure wherein naturally equivalent forms occur in equivalent positions".

Stylistic analysis is thus a useful method in understanding the linguistic units poets employ in their inimitable styles and in bringing out meanings that reside in the poem. Stylistics proves to be an additional approach to a type of literary appreciation where intuition and linguistics blend for more effect and clarity of thoughts.

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