THE CONCEPTS OF STYLE AND STYLISTICS

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INTRODUCTION

Stylistics, a yoking of style and linguistics, is a discipline which has been approached

from many perspectives. Its meaning varies, based on the theory that is adopted. When

we carry out the different activities that are connected to our area of business, either in

spoken or written forms, we often use devices of thought and the rules of language, but

there are variations so as to change meanings or say the same thing in different ways.

This is what the concept of style is based upon: the use of language in different ways, all for the purpose of achieving a common goal - to negotiate meanings.

Stylistics is the study and interpretation of texts in regard to their linguistic and tonal style. As a discipline, it links[literary criticism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary_criticism) to [linguistics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linguistics). It does not function as an autonomous domain on its own, but it can be applied to an understanding of [literature](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literature) and [journalism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Journalism) as well as [linguistics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linguistics). Sources of study in stylistics may range from canonical works of writing to popular texts, and from [advertising](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Advertising) copy to [news](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/News), non-fiction, and [popular culture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pop_culture), as well as to [political](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics) and [religious](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion) [discourse](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discourse).

Stylistics as a conceptual discipline may attempt to establish principles capable of explaining particular choices made by individuals and social groups in their use of language, such as in the literary production and reception of [genre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genre), the study of [folk art](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folk_art), in the study of spoken [dialects](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dialects) and [registers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Register_(sociolinguistics)), and can be applied to areas such as [discourse analysis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discourse_analysis)as well as [literary criticism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary_criticism).

Common features of style include the use of [dialogue](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dialogue), including regional [accents](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Accent_(dialect)) and individual [dialects](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dialects) (or [ideolects](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideolects" \o "Ideolects)), the use of [grammar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grammar), such as the observation of [active voice](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Active_voice) and [passive voice](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passive_voice), the distribution of [sentence](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sentence_(linguistics)) lengths, the use of particular [language registers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Register_(sociolinguistics)), and so on. In addition, stylistics is a distinctive term that may be used to determine the connections between the form and effects within a particular variety of language. Therefore, stylistics looks at what is 'going on' within the language; what the linguistic associations are that the style of language reveals.

OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

(i) define style and stylistics;

(ii) identify and explain at least three perspectives on style;

(iii) explain stylistics as a multi-dimensional discipline.

MAIN CONTENT

Stylistics is a broad term that has assumed different meanings from different linguistic scholars. But it can simply be said to be the study of style. Style on its own as defined by Lucas (1955:9) is: the effective use of language, especially in prose, whether to make statements or to rouse emotions. It involves first of all the power to put fact with clarity and brevity.

The term is applied to the realm of linguistics and literary science which studies peculiarities of a writer individual manner of using language means to achieve his goals of influencing the reader.

The term “STYLE” originated from the Latin “stilus” which means a pen used by the Romans for writing on wax, tablets. In the course of time it developed several meanings, each one applied to a specific study of language elements and their use in speech.

Prof. Galperin defines INDIVIDUAL STYLE as a unique combination of language units, expressive means and stylistic peculiar to a given writer, which makes that writer’s works or even utterances easily recognizable.

Saussure’s disciple Charles Bally modeled his ideas of style on a structural conception of language and started that branch of general linguistics which is sometimes called linguostylistics.

Style has also been defined as the description and analysis of the variability forms of linguistic items in actual language use. Leech (1969: 14) quotes Aristotle as saying that “the most effective means of achieving both clarity and diction and a certain dignity is the use of altered from of words.”

Stylistics is also defined as a study of the different styles that are present in either a given utterance or a written text or document. The consistent appearance of certain structures, items and elements in a speech, an utterance or in a given text is one of the major concerns of Stylistics. Stylistics requires the use of traditional levels of linguistic description such as sounds, form, structure and meaning. It then follows that the consistent appearance of certain structures, items and elements in speech utterances or in a given text is one of the major concerns of stylistics. Linguistic Stylistic studies is concerned with the varieties of language and the exploration of some of the formal linguistic features which characterize them. The essence and the usefulness of stylistics is that it enables the immediate understanding of utterances and texts, thereby maximizing our enjoyment of the texts.

The concepts of style and stylistic variation in language are based on the general notion that within the language system, the content can be encoded in more than one linguistic form. Thus, it is possible for it to operate at all linguistic levels such as phonological, lexical and syntactic. Therefore, style may be regarded as a choice of linguistic means, as deviation from the norms of language use, as recurrent features of linguistic forms and as comparisons. Stylistics deals with a wide range of language varieties and styles that that are possible in creating different texts, whether spoken or written, monologue or dialogue, formal or informal, scientific or religious etc.

Again, stylistics is concerned with the study of the language of literature or the study of the language habits of particular authors and their writing patterns. From the foregoing, stylistics can be said to be the techniques of explication which allows us to define objectively what an author has done, (linguistic or non-linguistic), in his use of language.

The main aim of stylistics is to enable us understand the intent of the author in the manner the information has been passed across by the author or writer. Therefore, stylistics is concerned with the examination of grammar, lexis, semantics as well as phonological properties and discursive devices. Stylistics is more interested in the significance of function that the chosen style fulfils.

The analysis of literary style goes back to the study of [classical rhetoric](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhetoric), though modern stylistics has its roots in [Russian Formalism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Formalism)[[](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stylistics_(field_of_study)#cite_note-4) and the related [Prague School](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prague_Linguistic_Circle)of the early twentieth century.

In 1909, [Charles Bally](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Bally)'s Traité de stylistique française had proposed stylistics as a distinct academic discipline to complement [Saussurean](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ferdinand_de_Saussure" \o "Ferdinand de Saussure) linguistics. For Bally, Saussure's linguistics by itself couldn't fully describe the language of personal expression. Bally's programme fitted well with the aims of the Prague School.

Taking forward the ideas of the Russian Formalists, the Prague School built on the concept of [foregrounding](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foregrounding), where it is assumed that poetic language is considered to stand apart from non-literary background language, by means of deviation (from the norms of everyday language) or [parallelism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parallelism_(rhetoric)). According to the Prague School, however, this background language isn't constant, and the relationship between poetic and everyday language is therefore always shifting.

[Roman Jakobson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Jakobson) had been an active member of the Russian Formalists and the Prague School, before emigrating to America in the 1940s. He brought together Russian Formalism and American [New Criticism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Criticism) in his Closing Statement at a conference on stylistics at [Indiana University](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indiana_University) in 1958. Published as Linguistics and Poetics in 1960, Jakobson's lecture is often credited with being the first coherent formulation of stylistics, and his argument was that the study of poetic language should be a sub-branch of linguistics.[[10]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stylistics_(field_of_study)#cite_note-10) The poetic function was one of six general [functions of language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jakobson%27s_functions_of_language) he described in the lecture.

[Michael Halliday](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Halliday) is an important figure in the development of British stylistics. His 1971 study Linguistic Function and Literary Style: An Inquiry into the Language of William Golding's The Inheritors is a key essay. One of Halliday's contributions has been the use of the term [register](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Register_(sociolinguistics)) to explain the connections between language and its context. For Halliday register is distinct from [dialect](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dialect). Dialect refers to the habitual language of a particular user in a specific geographical or social context. Register describes the choices made by the user, choices which depend on three variables: field ("what the participants... are actually engaged in doing", for instance, discussing a specific subject or topic), [tenor](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tenor_(linguistics)) (who is taking part in the exchange) and mode (the use to which the language is being put).

Fowler comments that different fields produce different language, most obviously at the level of [vocabulary](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vocabulary) (Fowler. 1996, 192) The linguist [David Crystal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Crystal) points out that Halliday's 'tenor' stands as a roughly equivalent term for ‘style’, which is a more specific alternative used by linguists to avoid ambiguity. (Crystal. 1985, 292) Halliday’s third category, mode, is what he refers to as the symbolic organisation of the situation. Downes recognises two distinct aspects within the category of mode and suggests that not only does it describe the relation to the medium: written, spoken, and so on, but also describes the [genre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genre) of the text. (Downes. 1998, 316) Halliday refers to genre as pre-coded language, language that has not simply been used before, but that predetermines the selection of textual meanings. The linguist [William Downes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Downes) makes the point that the principal characteristic of register, no matter how peculiar or diverse, is that it is obvious and immediately recognisable. (Downes. 1998, 309)

Style as Choice

While examining the concept stylistics, it is equally essential to give attention to the notion of choice. Choice is a very vital instrument of stylistics since it deals with the variations and the options that are available to an author. Since language provides its users with more than one choice in a given situation, there are different choices available to the writer in a given text. This then depends on the situation and genre the writer chooses in expressing thoughts and opinions. Traugott and Pratt (1980: 29 – 30) clarify the connection between language and choice as the characteristic choices exhibited in a text.

With the writer’s choice, there is a reflection of his ego and the social condition of his environment. In determining the appropriate choice of linguistic elements, two important choice planes are open to the writer: the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic. The paradigmatic axis is also referred to as the vertical or choice axis while the syntagmatic is the horizontal axis. The vertical axis gives a variety of choices between one item and other items; the writer then chooses the most appropriate word. Thus, the paradigmatic axis is able to account for the given fillers that occupy a particular slot while still maintaining the structure of the sentence. At the paradigmatic level, for example, a writer or speaker can choose between “start” and “commence”, “go” and “proceed.”

Style as the Man

This is based on the notion that every individual has his or her own unique way of doing things and that no two persons are of exactly the same character. There are always distinctive features that distinguish one person from the other; thus in literary style, one is able to differentiate between the writings of Soyinka and Achebe, based on their use of language, among other things. A person’s style may also be shaped by his social and political background, religious inclination, culture, education, geographical location, etc. Simply put, the notion of style as the man sees style as an index of personality. But this perspective is not without its own problems. For example, one may exhibit different styles on different occasions; when this happens, do we say the writer has different personalities?

Style as Deviation

When an idea is presented in a way that is different from the expected way, then we say such a manner of carrying it out has deviated from the norm. The concept of style as deviation is based on the notion that there are rules, conventions and regulations that guide the different activities that must be executed. Thus, when these conventions are not complied with, there is deviation. Deviation in stylistics is concerned with the use of different styles from the expected norm of language use in a given genre of writing. It is a departure from what is taken as the common practice. Language deviation refers to an intentional selection or choice of language use outside of the range of normal language. Language is a system organized in an organic structure by rules and it provides all the rules for its use such as phonetic, grammatical, lexical, etc. Thus, any piece of writing or material that has intentionally jettisoned the rules of language in some way is said to have deviated. Stylistics helps to identify how and why a text has deviated. Trangott and Pratt (1980: 31) believe that the idea of style as deviance is favoured by the “generative frame of reference.” It is an old concept which stems from the work of such scholars as Jan Mukarovsky. Mukarovsky relates style to foregrounding and says that “the violation of the norm of the standard… is what makes possible the poetic utilization of language” (see Traugott and Pratt 1980: 31).

Deviation may occur at any level of language description e.g. phonological, graphological, syntactic, lexico-semantic, etc. At the graphological level, for example, we may see capital letters where they are not supposed to be. At the syntactic level, subject and verb may not agree in number. Or the normal order of the clause elements may not be observed e.g. Adjunct may come before the subject. At the lexico-semantic level, words that should not go together may be deliberately brought together. e.g. “dangerous safety,” “open secret.”

Style as Conformity

Style as conformity can be seen as the first available option for a writer to express himself. This is so because virtually all possible fields that a written material can belong to have been established. Any style that is distinct is so as a result of deviation. In fact, it is on the notion of “style as conformity” that the idea of “style as choice” operates and then results in or brings out the possibility of style as deviation. That is, a writer needs, first of all, to decide whether to conform with the established style or to deviate. It is not in all situations that a writer enjoys flexibility to deviate. Style as conformity is often “strictly enforced” in certain fields or circumstances. This is often in academic/educational field as regard students’ research projects. It is also found so in some professional writings, where a considerable conformity to the established format or diction is expected for a text to earn acceptability.

One major weakness of conformity to the established style is that it clips creativity. But the moment a text accommodates or injects some creativity in the style, it becomes marked as deviation from the norm.

Style as Period or Time

Style may also relate to time/period. This is so because language is dynamic – it is always changing. This becomes obvious when we look at the stages in the development of the English language e.g. Old English, Middle English and Modern English. When we look at a script in Old English now, it will seem as if it were written in a different language because of the differences in syntax, vocabulary, spelling, etc. Even within the so-called Modern English, there are variations. The type of English we use today is different from Shakespearean English in many ways. So, since language changes along time axis, style is also expected to vary along the same axis. The study of language along time axis is termed diachronic linguistics. You may compare diachronic linguistics with synchronic linguistics which deals with the study of language at a particular time/period. The style of any given period has recognizably predominant features that make such a period distinct. A period usually dictates the style employed by the writers. For example, Shakespeare and his contemporaries used a particular style of writing i.e. writing in verses. It was not until Herik Ibsen came up with plays in the prose form that the previous style was abandoned. Similarly, the Victorian, Elizabethan, Renaissance and even the modern periods all have peculiar styles different from another. In a nutshell, the noticeable convention and pattern of language use that inform the urge of a particular period, make the style of that period.

Style as Situation

Usually, language is used according to situation or circumstance. It is the context that determines language choice in speaking or writing. Certain words are appropriate for certain occasions, while some are considered taboo, vulgar or abominable.

Consequently, a given situation has a great influence on the choice made at every level of language description. The concept of register further buttresses this point. For example, registers as aspect of style tend to be associated with particular groups of people or sometimes specific situations of use (Journalese, Legalese, Liturgese, Babytalk, the language of Sport Commentaries), the language of criminals –argot, the languages of the courtroom, the classroom, etc). We shall say more about register, later in this course.

Examples

Stylistic study helps cultivate a sense of appropriateness. First, a certain style is determined by the characteristics of the USER of language, such as the age, sex, education, socio-regional or ethnic background.

Second, it’s related to the characteristics of the USE of language in situation:

* # role-relationship between addresser and addressee (degree of intimacy)
* # medium of communication (speech or writing)
* # setting: private or public
* # purpose for which language is used (to inform, persuade…)

For instance:

(1)

Dear Sir,

I must apologize for the delay in replying to your letter of the 30th of December… (2)

Dear Jane,

I’m terribly sorry not to have got round to writing before now …

1. Now allow me to *propose a toast to* the friendship between …
2. *Here’s to* the health of our friends!
3. *Cheers!*
4. *Bottoms up!*

* When his dad *died*, Peter had to *get another job*.
* After his father’s *death*, Peter had to *change his job*.
* On the *decease* of his father, Mr. Brown was obliged to *seek alternative employment*.

Stylistic study helps achieve adaptation in translation.

For instance,

1. Whoever tries to *twist you up*, may the end of his nose *take a twist*.

2. He said to his little son, “*At that time*, I was so *fatigued* after a day’s *drudgery* that I found it very hard to *mount* the *kang.* My whole *frame* aching *acutely*, I couldn’t go to sleep however hard I tried.”

3. He said to his little son, “ *In those days*, I was usually so *done up* after a day’s *hard work* that I could hardly *get on* the *kang*. As my whole *body* ached *like anything*, I simply couldn’t get to sleep even I tried to.

4. It has been noted with concern that the stock of books in the library has been declining alarmingly. Students are requested to remind themselves of the rules of the borrowing and returning of books, and to bear in mind the needs of other students. Penalties for overdue book will in the future be strictly enforced.

5. The number of books in the library has been going down. Please make sure you know the rules for borrowing, and don’t forget that the library is for everyone’s convenience. So from now on, we’re going to enforce the rules strictly. You have been warned!

6. Although learning *is judged* to require from teachers (and *sometimes indeed it does*), real *instructors* may be found *not so much* in school or in great laboratories *as* in the student’s powers of insight.

7. *We think* we learn from teachers, and we sometimes do. *But* teachers are not always be found in school or in great laboratories. Sometimes what we learn depends upon our own powers of insight.

*8. You know*, people are always saying they learn from teachers! *Ok, so they do, sometimes.* But what I want to *get across* is this: you don’t always find your teachers in schools or in *labs*, either. *No sir!* Sometimes you find the teacher right in your own eyes and ears and brains. *That’s where it’s at!*

CONCLUSION

From the above, it becomes clear that the study of style is the preoccupation of stylistics. Stylistics itself can be approached from different perspectives. The basic objective of stylistics is to reveal how language is used to express what it expresses in a given text.

SUMMARY

Stylistics is an important area of linguistics which has attracted the attention of many scholars. Apart from its academic relevance, stylistics is applicable in many other areas of human endeavours where language is used. As a student, of stylistics you should pay close attention to how language is used in any text. We have focused in this unit on some popular perspectives on style, namely, style as choice, style as the man, style as deviation, style as conformity and style as time/period.

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