

NEW APPROACHES IN STYLISTICS: A REVIEW OF THE CONTROVERSIES LEADING TO THE PROLIFERATION OF DIVERSE APPROACHES

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to systematically characterize the theoretical constructs of textual analysis as the basis for the controversies in stylistic analysis. Thus, the article discusses various approaches as reported in the stylistics literature along with their respective strengths and weaknesses. It also attempts to shed some light on the controversies of stylistics in general as well as the various approaches. The paper discussed the rationales that underpin the development of diverse approaches in Stylistics with a view to elucidate the critics' perspectives by means of the researcher's perspective in relation to their statements concerning stylistics. The paper also highlights the interrelationship between the prevailing constructs and the emergence of new approaches as the shortcomings of the former led to the emergence of the latter. Therefore the paper realised the choice of linguistic features as postulated by Halliday and Mathiessen (2014) as an ideal theoretical underpinning in stylistic analysis.

Keywords: Stylistics, stylistic approaches, linguistic, controversies, proliferation

Introduction

The field of Stylistics has evolved tremendously over the years due to parallel developments in linguistic theories. This allows readers

to comprehend, interpret and thus appreciate literature through linguistic analysis. Widdowson (1975) claims that stylistics is the study of literary discourse from a linguistic point of view, but Simpson (1993) and Verdonk (2002) state that Stylistics seeks to interpret literary texts through linguistic analysis. Weber (1996) and Carter and Simpson (1989) explain various developments in Stylistics pointing out that these transformations are generally attributable to the criticism stylistics faced over the last five decades. These criticisms contribute to the teleological metamorphosis of stylistics through postulation of various approaches in an effort to address them (criticisms). The evolution of new approaches in particular postulates a shift on the Stylistics paradigm.

Theoretical constructs in stylistics leading to controversies

The advent of new approaches to stylistics was a direct result of perceived weaknesses in Jacobson's Formalist Stylistics which he first postulated in his seminal paper, at the Indiana Style Conference in 1958. While scholars found his approach as provided a framework for a thorough and systematic analysis of texts, the actual interpretative process failed to establish linkages between the analytical and interpretative aspects. Attridge (1987) argued that the analysis of Formalist stylistics approach is linguistically too formal on the one hand and it may not be relevant to literary analysis on the other. In his attempt to bridge this dichotomy as well as address the interpretative weaknesses in Formalist stylistics, Halliday (1971) propounded the functional stylistics approach. Notwithstanding its merit of highlighting how meaning could be inferred by means of systematic choices of words, the functionalist approach was nevertheless criticised for creating a certain world-view in stylistic analysis.

The perceived weaknesses of both Formalist and Functionalist approaches prompted Fish (1979) to propose Affective Stylistics to

complement the two previous approaches. This approach was also accused of mainly a reader-centred version of stylistics as the fundamental principles underpinning the approach emphasised the need to focus on the readers' assumptions, expectations and interpretive processes. Despite their underlying and obvious limitations, the formal, functional and affective approaches still reign supreme in modern stylistics, as these long-standing approaches are employed as core frameworks and act as guiding principles for new approaches.

Other two diverse approaches were emerged: namely Pedagogical Stylistics and Pragmatic Stylistics. These two approaches as highlighted by Widdowson (1973) and Carter (1986) augmented the development of reading and writing skills while also sensitising its analysis to different uses of the language. They were focused on contextualisation with a wide acknowledgment from stylisticians in textual analysis and interpretation. Pragmatic Stylistics emphasises the crucial role of contexts in stylistics analysis. This approach further posited that style was neither totally inherent in texts (the formalist view) nor totally resident in the readers' mind (the Affective view).

In advocating Pragmatic Stylistics, Short and Pratt (1986) focused on speech act as a theoretical underpinning, which is concerned with what speakers say and their associated actions while speaking, and also in the use of presuppositions and inferences. In ordinary language, to presuppose something means to assume it as provided by Saeed (2003) that "a" presupposes "b" as follows:

- a. He's stopped turning into a werewolf every full moon.
- b. He used to turn into a werewolf every full moon
- a. Her husband is a fool.
- b. She has a husband
- a. I don't regret leaving London.
- b. I left London

- a. The prime Minister of Malaysia is in Dublin this week.
- b. Malaysia has a Prime Minister.
- a. I do regret leaving London.
- b. I left London. (Saeed, 2003:101)

Furthermore, Critical Stylistics, a brainchild of Fowler (1986) and Birch (1989), focused on the principles of discourse analysis to demonstrate how language is used in social contexts. Unlike Halliday, which view language as a resource for meaning making; and social semiotic, Fowler and Birch emphasised the inherent complexities subsuming the relationship between language and ideology. The concern of Critical Stylistics in ideology and representation culminated in the emergence of Feminist Stylistics, a prominent proponent being Mills (1992). Feminist Stylistics is interested in unmasking patriarchal ideologies and denaturalising patriarchal assumptions. Halliday's transitivity is often used in the analysis. Basically, the analysis aims to critically examine the representations of women in literature and popular cultures.

Another approach which is dependent on Critical Stylistics was Cognitive Stylistics. Sharing an affinity with the fundamental principles of Halliday's linguistics, the proponents of Cognitive Stylistics like Freeman advocates that meaning is perceived to be a relativistic ally inferential process that generates different interpretations, because different readers use different assumptions whilst deconstructing the text.

In addition, stylistics has also been accepted in the legal fraternity with the advent of Forensic Stylistics, which is known as stylometry. Forensic Stylistics deals with the examination of style in legal cases particularly the authorship. In contrast to forensic linguistics, which examines all forms of language namely speech, choice of words among others, forensic stylistics is mostly concerned with the written language of a given author, specifically, it determines identity of the author of a document in the legal profession.

Stylistic Approaches in the Study of Non-literary texts

There are three other approaches in relation to the analysis of non-literary texts namely Discourse Stylistics, Rhetorical Stylistics and Corpus Stylistics. Discourse Stylistics serves the purpose of drawing specifically on techniques and methods of discourse analysis. On the other hand, an analysis being carried out with the purpose of impressing or affecting others emotionally is known as Rhetorical Stylistics. Finally, Corpus Stylistics deals with the interface between corpus linguistic and literary stylistics. Generally, controversies pertaining to stylistics surround stylistics (in general) and the various approaches to stylistics.

Style and Stylistics as culminated in new approaches

The term “style” has been an elusive term and that it has continued to defy a simple definition (Idiagbon, 2007). It means different things to different people. In English studies, style can be regarded as a distinct method of speaking or writing. This definition involves the choice of vocabulary, phrase, or sentence structure. Despite the elusiveness of the term, Crystal and Davy (1969) identified four commonly occurring senses of the term “Style”. According to them, these four senses need to be differentiated in any stylistic analysis. The first sense refers to some or all of the language habits of one person, as Shakespeare’s Style (s) or Style of James Joyce. This sense according to them is often confused with an individual’s personality.

The second sense refers to some or all of the language habits shared by a group of people at one time, or even a period of time, as when talking about the Style of the Augustan poets, the Style of old English heroic poetry, the Style in which civil service forms are written, or Styles of public speaking (Crystal and Davy, 1969: 10).

In the third sense of the term “style”, Crystal and Davy (1969) gave a more restrictive meaning of style as an evaluative method referring to the effectiveness of a mode of expression. It is in this sense that style is often defined as “saying the right thing in the most effective way”. It is also in this sense that style is said to be the same as “good manners”.

The fourth and the last sense, as posited by Crystal and Davy (1969: 10), refers to literary language. They observe that:

Style has long been associated primarily exclusively with literature, as a characteristic of “good effective” or “beautiful” writing for example, and the focus of the literary critic attention alone.

With these four senses of style in mind, Crystal and Davy described their proposition as to the preferred approach. They argue that their approach prefers to see style in the first and second senses. That is to say, they understand style more as the language habits of either an individual or a group or texts. Then they believe that the main aim of Stylistics is to analyse language habits with the main purpose of identifying, from the general mass linguistic features common to English as used on every conceivable occasion, to those features which are restricted to certain kinds of social contexts. Linguistic feature here means “any bit of speech or writing which a person can single out from the general flow of language and discuss a particular word, part of a word, sequence of words or way of uttering a word” (Crystal and Davy, 1969).

In their book *Style in Fiction*, Leech and Short (1981) consider the term “style” as having a fairly controversial meaning. However, they give a broader but more definite explanation. According to them, style refers to the way which language is used in a given context, by a given person, for a given purpose. Some scholars such as Widdowson (1975), Simpson (2004) and Attenborough (2014), linked the concept of

stylistics with applied linguistics. Their focus is the interpretation of a text in relation to its linguistic and tonal style. These scholars do not see Stylistics as a domain or discipline, which function on its own, but can be applied to literary works, journalism as well as linguistics. Therefore, the trends associated with the concept can be taken from varied approaches, mainly the historical perspectives, ranging from the early twentieth century to the late twentieth century. The analysis of Style in the study of classical rhetoric has its root in Russian Formalism and Prague school of the early twentieth century (Widdowson, 1975). Stylistics then was restricted to literary studies. The main concern of stylistics was to complement the Saussurean linguistics.

The ideas of the Prague school and Russian Formalists were built on the concept of “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 (Carter and Nash, 1990). According to the Prague school, however this background language is not constant, and the relationship between poetic and everyday language is therefore always shifting. The major concern of the Prague school and Russian Formalists as explained by Rasheed (2002) is the search for features of language, which distinguish literary discourses from their non-literary counterparts by focusing closely on literary devices, foregrounding and deviance. One of the dangers of early traditional stylisticians, as revealed by Rasheed (2002) is their obsession with abnormal, playing little or no attention to the effect of linguistic devices which are normal but literarily effective.

Rasheed (2002) posited that: “A work of literature can thus be studied from the point of view of a particular feature of grammar or vocabulary, but this particular feature is peculiar to literature.” Briefly, Rasheed’s approach to stylistic analysis is meant to bridge the dichotomy between literary and non-literary stylistic analysis regarding

the choice of linguistic features. The features would be catalogued and classified within the framework of general linguistics. This same view was adopted by Halliday (1978) that grammatical surface structure of an utterance offers less than is needed for evaluation and for determining meaning. However, both Halliday (1978) and Rasheed (2002) practically applied their approaches into literary texts.

Halliday (1994) maintained that; the linguistic study of literature is textual description which is not very different from any other textual description. He asserts that the functional nature of language is reflected in its internal structure, especially in its semantic and syntactic organisation. Michael Halliday is an important figure in the development of Stylistics. In his writings on language metafunctions, Halliday (1971; 1978) studied one of the possible options available within the ideational metafunction – the transitivity pattern to illustrate how stylistics may be able to benefit from the application of grammatical model to the analysis of a literary text. In “a study of linguistic function and literary style: An enquiry into the language of William Golding’s *The inheritors*”, Halliday (1971) showed how Golding used transitivity to give an impression of the thought processes of the main character.

One of Halliday’s contributions has been the use of the process types to explain the connections between language and its context. According to Halliday (1978), the analysis of a text is determined by register, which is distinct from dialect, as the latter refers to habitual language of a particular user in a specific geographical or social context, while the former describes the choices made by the user (Nikolas, 2007).

Subsequently, Halliday and other scholars working in the SFL, such as Halliday and Mathiessen (2004; 2014), Mathiessen (1990), Eggins (2004) and Bloor and Bloor (2004; 2013) described the concept of “Transitivity” as a way meanings are represented in a clause. These

meanings reside in the systemic choices made of the processes, participants and circumstances. These scholars believe that the choices made in the system of transitivity indicate the way the writer sees the world around him, because they are concerned with the representation of the mental picture that a speaker or writer has of the world (world-view) (Halliday 1985; 1994; Halliday and Mathiessen, 2004 and 2014; Bloor and Bloor, 2004 and 2013).

Therefore, Halliday (1973) considers transitivity a tool which provides a set of options whereby the speaker or writer encodes his experience of the external world, and of the internal world of his own consciousness through the way the participants in the processes and the circumstances are expressed (Halliday, 1973:134). Transitivity thus focuses on how a writer represents who acts (Actor) and who is acted upon (Patient), who says (Sayer) what (Verbiage) to whom (Target). Transitivity being part of the ideational metafunction, portrays the writer's world-view, and because of this, many critical analysts such as Fairclough (1989; 1992); Fowler (1991; 2008); Simpson (1993) and Taiwo (2004; 2007) investigate it as a means of uncovering the links between language and ideology; and how meanings are foregrounded, backgrounded or not included in a text. However, these critical analysts predominantly rely on contextual variables toward realisation of meaning.

Linguistic Choice as a theoretical framework for Stylistic Analysis

The concept of "choice" is fundamental in Stylistic analysis and has been approached by different scholars that share different but overlapping perspectives. The general overview of the stylistic approach to language study as posited by (Halliday, 1978 and Rasheed, 2002) above, is the meaning-making potentials (semiotic potentials) that every language sought to accomplish; a resource for the social man for making meaning by choosing (choice), and this meaning resides in specific

contexts and in the patterns of choices of linguistic features. This approach has been recognized by Halliday (1968; 1985; 1994); Halliday and Mathiessen (2004; 2014) as an explanatory and evaluative framework for analysing language use in context.

The proponents of the SFL, with Halliday as a leading figure, highlight the systematic variations as related to contextual values as key issues in linguistic descriptions. Thus, they explain that linguistic features provide a speaker or writer a rich inventory of alternative choices, which he or she eventually makes from the totality of other choices open to him or her. These choices depend on his position in the context of situation and on the function that a particular choice performs in his life and the function of that choice in the context toward meanings realisation.

Egins (2004) maintains that language's distinctive feature has been a semiotic system, because every choice made of each linguistic system acquires meaning against the background of other choices which could have been made. This semiotic interpretation of language allows one to consider the appropriacy and inappropriacy of different linguistic choices in relation to their contexts of use and to view language as a resource which we use to make meaning by choosing.

Discussion

This concept of choice is what underlies the critical analytical approach to the interpretation of texts. An analyst would be concerned with why a speaker or writer chooses certain linguistic feature and not others and what social purpose such choices are set to accomplish (Egins, 2004:20). The analytical approach in SFL represents how linguistic systems are used to construct meaning, which is a set of options with an entry condition. That is to say, a set of things of which one must be chosen, together with a statement of the conditions under which the choice is made available. There are certain fundamental

notions that characterise the systemic functional linguistics. First, the approach is based on the notion of choice. The speaker or writer of a language can be regarded as carrying out, simultaneously and successively, a number of distinct choices at any given moment. However, they posit that it is the system which formalises the notion of choice in language. To this end, the description of a language can be just a list of the choices that the speaker or writer has made. These descriptions made of the choices made as against the others, is where the meaning of the text analysed lies. The option selected by the speaker is realised as structure. Its function is to show how such structure is related to one another and this is shown in terms of options. It also indicates where a new set of options is open to the speaker or writer. Therefore, the determining factor of meaning realisation in this sense is that of choice. Functionalist (Halliday) Facilitates both analysis and interpretation of literary texts by means of systematic analysis. However, the absence of consideration for readers' response is complicated approach and was criticised by Fish, because readers' response is inherent in texts analysis.

Fowler and other stylisticians reiterated that the scientific and systematic method adopted in their analysis did not constrain linguists from critically interpreting texts, as it did literary critics. This contradicted his earlier assertion that literature was fundamentally a successful work of linguistics. It thus, provided ammunition for stylisticians to respond that they had sufficient grounds for analysing literature by means of linguistic analysis. Fowler and other stylisticians use linguistic approach to literature to understand and appreciate literature. Not everyone can understand literature when encountering a text for the first time (Carter (Ed.), 1982). Reading literature is different from reading other discourses especially reading it in a second or foreign language. Reading literature requires a lot of components to be examined: the style, points of view, theme, plot, and historical

background, to name a few. Style is an important component of literature. Fowler and other stylisticians believe that style is not “caught”, but rather has to be learnt and taught.

Moreover, style is not exclusively literary, because one employs one’s own style of writing. The word “choices” convey one’s style. Style is something that can be seen and study in other discourses as well. The concern of stylistics in the study of style brings into manifestation Discourse Analysis in stylistics where Critical Discourse Analysis emerges (Weber, 1996). Their concerns are similar to stylistics namely analysing texts linguistically. The difference however, lies on the texts analysed. While stylistics seeks to analyse literary texts, Critical Discourse Analysis analyses other discourses such as media texts. There is on-going debate between literary critics and linguists as one believes a person is born a natural grammarian or literary critics and there is nothing in between. Therefore, they view linguistic criticism or stylistics as something impossible. This is due to the inability of literary critics to comprehend linguistic analysis. Literary critics fall short of grappling the linguistic competence or the role played by stylisticians that is required in understanding, interpretation and appreciating literary works. However, it is proven that stylistics is very much accommodating in ESL contexts. Scholars claim that stylistics enables ESL students to understand literary texts (Short, 1989; Mackay, 1986; Wallace, 2003; Carter and Long, 1991; Shakila, 2004 and Ganakumaran, 2007). Short (1989:6) stated that stylistic analysis has been of particular concern to the foreign-language learners (non-native speakers) as it has been seen as a device by which the understanding of relatively complex texts can be achieved. Simpson (2004) puts forward that in the 21st century, stylistics is much alive and well.

Modern stylistics is flourishing and witnessed by the proliferation of sub disciplines where stylistic methods are enriched and enabled by theories of discourse, culture and society. For example,

Feminist Stylistics emerged due to the manifestation of Feminist Theory in stylistics. Cognitive Stylistics emerged from Cognitive Psychology and Discourse Stylistics from Discourse Analysis. Furthermore, stylistics is taught and researched at departments of language, literature as well as linguistics at various universities all over the world. It is a valued method in language learning and teaching especially second language learners as the latter are exposed to the formal knowledge of language. Therefore, linguistic orientation is something that is applicable to second language learners. Stylistics is a discipline that is not only helpful in understanding literature; it also assists in developing one's critical skills. Therefore, there is no doubt that the stylisticians' approach is not an accident as claimed by Mackay but design on the notion of objectivity. For stylisticians, 'being objective means to be detailed, systematic and explicit in analysis'. This does not mean that the analysis should be true for all the time. Stylisticians aim to transmit explicit and empirical analyses. They believe that understanding is always provisional, and can always in principle be revised and improved.

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing discussion, it appears that these controversies play an important role in the development of stylistics. The critiques and arguments warrant stylisticians to continuously explore and consistently improve their approaches. As any other discipline, be it linguistics or others, it is through constructive advice, arguments and critiques by scholars at either within or across disciplines that help it to reach what it is presently. Similarly, stylistics too is subject to such conventions. As can be seen, the controversies within each style and approach have sparked the advent of improvised stylistics such as Critical, Feminist, Cognitive, Discourse, Corpus, Rhetorical, Forensic and Bidirectional. Thus, the success of stylistics in

infiltrating other fields and in contact with other research paradigm is proven. The flourishing development of stylistics from the 20th century through the present shows that stylistics is a subject and field that had attracted the attention of many academicians (Simpson, 2004). Therefore, stylistics remains liable, practical and essential in understanding texts, literary ones in particular. It should be noted that the long-standing dispute as evidenced in the controversy between literary criticism and linguistic criticism would not just stop here. Literary critics, with experience and vast knowledge on literary criticism will not be able to see the usefulness of linguistic analysis in literary studies. This could be perhaps due to their lack of formal knowledge of language or their refusal to admit that a new rival has emerged. Stylistics, in fact, has opened the world of literature to anyone and everyone in reading, teaching, analysing and thus appreciating literature.

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