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Stylistics and Linguistic Analyses of Literary Works

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Abstract

A linguistic analysis of literature has caused debates among linguists and between linguists and literary critics. The debate among linguists occurs because they have different opinions regarding the nature of literary language, while the debate between linguists and literary scholars arises as literary scholars question the authority of linguistics to study literary writings. Therefore, in this paper I argue that the language of literature is similar to that of non-literary texts, and I also believe that because the centrality of language in literary writings, linguistics, as the study of language, has the authority to study literature. One linguistic approach to literature is stylistics, which studies the forms, functions, and meanings of literary language in a detailed and systematic way.

Keywords: linguistics; literature; literary language; stylistics;

1. Introduction

The linguistic study of literature has for long become a source of debate among linguists on the one hand and between linguists and literary scholars on the other. Some linguists, such as Mukařovský [1], Jakobson [2], and Widdowson [3], hold that the language of literature—especially the language of poetry or poetic language—is special, for it is different from non-literary or daily-used language. Some other linguists, including Fowler [4], Halliday [in 5], and Leech [6], object to the opinion and argue that the language of literature is not to be distinguished from the language of non-literary texts. Another argument concerning linguistic analysis of literature arises between linguists and literary scholars. The disagreement is mostly concerned with the legitimacy of linguistics in the analysis of literary works. Linguistic analysis of literature simplifies the works of literature into compilations of language units. Thus, the works lose their beauty because the analysis put too much emphasis on the investigation of the language units and neglect the value of literature as an artwork.

In this paper, I would like to argue that the debate over the nature of literary language is unfruitful because writers and poets use both ordinary and flowery languages to communicate their messages. The writers' choice of archaic or flowery language and ordinary language is part of their styles, and very frequently, their choices of styles are influenced by the contexts of production and reception. Mick Short [7] provides an interesting analysis of Edward Thomas's *Adlestrop*, where he shows that Thomas uses both formal and informal languages in one poem. This suggests that even in a poem, a poet can vary his choices of language.

Having discussed disagreements about literary language, I would then go on to deal with the dispute between linguists and literary scholars, and I argue that the analysis of literary works can be carried out from linguistic (stylistic) points of view. Following Fowler [4], I hold that linguistic analysis of literature can be conducted at various levels using various linguistic approaches, which

will make the analysis richer and which will enable the analyst to reveal the creativity of the piece of literary writings.

2. Controversy over the Nature of Literary Language

Literature, according to Fowler [4], differs from other forms of arts in the way it is expressed. Literature is expressed “in and through” language [4 p.198]; this suggests that language plays a central role in the world of literature. A person of letter uses language as a means to express her creativity, and the beauty or the value of her work thus lies in the language she chooses and the messages that she sends through the language. On the other hand, the reader enjoys the work by “reading” the language, through which he can uncover her messages. The pleasure of literary reading is therefore gained “in and through” language.

The language of literature, as some linguists put it, is special, as it is different from the language of non-literary communication. Regarding the language of poetry, for example, Mukařovský, a central figure of the Prague school of linguistics, holds that poetic language differs from ordinary language because poetic language deviates from linguistic norms: “The violation of the norm of the standard, its systematic violation is what makes possible the poetic utilization of language; without this possibility there would be no poetry” [8 p.31].

One instance of linguistic deviations of poetic language is rhyme, which occurs “when two or more words or phrases contain an identical or similar vowel sound, usually accented, and the consonant sounds (if any) that follow the vowel sound are identical” [9 p.649]. Rhyme is prevalent in the succeeding extract of Eliot’s *Rhapsody on A Windy Night* [in 8 p.25]:

...
Half-past one,
The street lamp sputtered,
The street lamp muttered,
...
Half-past three,
The lamp sputtered,
The lamp muttered in the dark.
The lamp hummed:
“Regard the moon,
....

The extract, as we shall readily see, has harmonious sound effects because of Eliot’s repetition of ‘sputtered’ and ‘muttered’ (and then ‘hummed’). “The sputtered ... muttered sequences are odd in another way, which is that they are highly repetitive and redundant” [8 p.31].

However, repetition that aims to arouse particular sound effects in the hearer or reader is present not only in poetry (or other literary genre) but also in non-literary forms of communication. Advertisements, for instance, often use repetition to produce certain effects in the audience. *Terus terang Phillips terang terus* is the Indonesian version of the caption of the Phillips electronic lamps. The words *terus* and *terang* are repeated either to produce harmonious sound effects or to create ambiguity. The caption can mean ‘honestly speaking, Phillips is continuously bright’ or ‘continuously bright, Phillips is bright continuously’. The fact that rhyme occurs not only in literary discourse but also in non-literary one makes the argument that literary language differs from non-literary language questionable.

In contrast to the idea of the particularity of literary language, some other linguists argue that the language of literary works is indistinctive from the language we use daily [4; Halliday [in 5]; 10]. Fowler [4 p.197] states that:

... This is the belief that there is a distinct difference between poetic or literary language on the one hand and ordinary language on the other. But these arguments are not empirically legitimate, and they are a serious obstacle to a linguistic criticism which attempts to allow to literature the communicative fullness that is a common property of language.

I agree with Fowler [4] that the debate concerning the nature of literary language misses the point of the enormous range of linguistic expressions under the name of “literature”. On the one hand, there are literary works, especially poetry, which are expressed in a language that is no longer used in daily communication; on the other hand, there are literary works in which the writers express their idea through daily-used language. Therefore, it is not always easy to generalize the form of the language of literary works. The language of Edward Thomas in the poem “Adlestrop” serves as a good example of how various literary (poetic) languages are [7]:

Yes, I remember Adlestrop – 1
The name, because one afternoon
Of heat the express train drew up there
Unwontedly. It was late June

The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat. 2
No one left and no one came
On the bare platform. What I saw
Was Adlestrop — only the name.

And willows, willow herb, and grass, 3
And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,
No whit less still and lonely fair
Than the high cloudlets in the sky.

And for that minute a blackbird sang 4
Close by, and round him, mistier,
Farther and farther, all the birds
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.

Short [7] explains that the poem is expressed through two different tones of communication. The first two stanzas are written in informal way, whereas the last two stanzas are formal. The first two stanzas are informal because they deal with a conversation in which the speaker of the poem, I, is involved. Notice that the poem begins with the word *yes*, which normally occurs in a conversation when an individual replies his partner’s question. The speaker of the poem is thus illustrated as answering his partner’s question: *Yes, I remember Adlestrop*. He then goes on further by describing what he remembers about Adlestrop in stanza 1 and stanza 2.

Also, Short [7] writes that, like in a conversation or in a spoken language, the first two stanzas of Thomas’s poem is marked by pauses, a reformulation, simple sentence structures, and daily-used vocabulary. Pauses occur at the end of line 1 and in the middle of line 8, indicated by the dash sign (—) after the word ‘Adlestrop’. Reformulation appears in the beginning of line 2 where the speaker reformulates his reference about Adlestrop. It is not the place itself that he remembers but its strange name (*The name*, because). Simple sentence structures and daily-used vocabulary are clear along stanza 1 and 2 of the poem.

However, this informal tone of conversation is not present in stanzas 3 and 4. The speaker of the poem changes his informal tone into a formal one in the last two stanzas. This can be seen from the

change of subject matter, the absence of pauses and reformulations, the more complex sentence structures and the use of archaic or formal words. In the last two stanzas, the speaker changes his subject matter into nature. The natural world is considered as a prototypical subject matter in poetry. This change of subject matter is indicated by the use of the words *willows* and *willow herb*. The sentence structures used in stanza 3 and 4 are more complex compared with those of stanza 1 and 2, and the words used are also formal. Instead of saying *haystack*, the speaker uses an archaic word *haycocks* [7].

Short [7] explains the poem “Adlestrop” thoroughly, but it is not my intention here to present his discussion of the poem any further. What I want to emphasize here is the fact that even in one single poem, a poet can switch his languages from a language considered to be ordinary to a language that is hardly used in daily communication. Writers often swing between two extremes: ordinary/ daily-used language and non-daily-used language. As it is not always easy to define the nature of literary language, I would prefer to view literary and non-literary language as a continuum, from which writers can choose their expression, rather than as two separated poles¹.

Having discussed the debate among linguists concerning the nature of literary language and concluded that literary and non-literary language is a continuum rather than two separated poles, I would like to go on with the discussion of the linguistic studies of literary language. There are a number of linguistic studies of literature. In this paper, I deal especially with stylistics.

3. Stylistics

Before discussing the framework of stylistics, I want to emphasize one important point that, as other forms of communication, literature is not an independent “text” which can be totally separated from its environment. Rather, it is a discourse which is entirely dependent on the context in which it occurs [11]. Hence, as Simpson and Hall [12] point out, literature is an instance of a natural language use with certain social contexts. The analysis of literary language and the analysis of literary works cannot be removed separately from the discussion of the writer, the readers, and the socio-cultural context wherein the works are produced.

Since it is an instance of natural language use or, in other words, since it is conveyed “in and through language” [4], literature is a valuable source of linguistic analysis. As I have mentioned earlier, like the nature of literary language, the discussion of linguistic analysis of literary language has always been the source of debate. This time the debate, which takes place between literary scholars and linguists, is centred upon an assumption that linguistic analysis of literature often leads to the formalisation of the literary works studied. Literature is not just a heap of linguistic forms or language units. There is something special, namely aesthetic or poetic effects, which cannot be explained simply from the analysis of linguistic forms.

However, this is not necessarily the case if we treat literature, as I have been argued before, as a discourse which depends entirely on the writer/the poet, the reader, and the socio-cultural context. This means that we should analyse not only what linguistic forms are used in a literary work but also what are the functions of the linguistic forms being used [4]. Hence, in order to attain a comprehensive analysis of a literary work, linguists should take into consideration both the forms and the functions of literary language.

One of the most common linguistic analyses on literature is *stylistics* or the study of *style*. ‘Style’ is “a consistent occurrence in the text of certain items and structures, or types of items and structures, among those offered by the language as a whole” [5 p.438]. Hence, style covers all linguistic levels of

¹ See Papafragou’s work on *Metonymy and Relevance*. Metonymy has always been treated as a figure of speech and thus a deviation from ordinary language. However, this is not necessarily the case because we often use metonymy un/consciously in our daily conversation. In this article, Papafragou argues that metonymy is not a natural class; rather, it is a continuum of cases, which ranges from the most creative one to the conventionalized metonymy [13; 14; 15].

the language of the literary work studied. Stylistics relates linguistic constituent units to their meanings or interpretations, and in describing the relationship between linguistic elements and their meanings, stylisticians need to work in a detailed and systematic way [7].

Further, Short [7] explains that stylistic analysis differs from traditional practical criticism in terms of degree and kind. Practical critics, according to Short [7], use evidence from the text, meaning that they use the language of the text, to support their opinions. However, their choice of evidence is more selective than that of a stylistician. In this point, Short [7] sees stylistics as “the logical extension of practical criticism” because to avoid the dangers of partiality, stylisticians would make their descriptions and analyses as thorough as possible. Another difference between stylistics and practical criticism that Short [7] points out relates to their difference of kind. According to Short [7], the main interest of many literary critics is to produce new interpretations of a text. This means that I will receive the critics’ attention only if I am able to produce new and fresh readings of, say, *Hamlet*. Quite contrary, stylistic study is interested in both: established as well as new interpretations of literary texts. Stylisticians, as Short [7] states, attempt to discover the meanings of a text and to describe the plausibility of such meanings. In their attempt to uncover the meanings of a literary work, stylisticians can start their analysis from agreed interpretations of the text.

This all suggests that there are two linguistic approaches to stylistic analysis. The first one deals with the situational factors which determine the linguistic choice whereas the second has something to do with the types of linguistic choice. The former focuses on the “elements” of communication, including the writer, the readers, and ends; while the latter refers to the elements of linguistic code, such as repetition [16]. These two approaches are very important in stylistic analysis in order to produce a thorough study. As is often the case, stylistics is criticised because of its failure to analyse literary works entirely. It is accused of being too analytical for it simply examines literary works into pieces of linguistic forms and leaves insufficient room for the readers’ interpretation or intuition. As a result, literature would be seen only as a heap or a bunch of linguistic elements which have no certain aesthetic meanings.

This is not necessarily the case if the study of style of literary works is carried out using two approaches mentioned earlier. This means that literature is treated not as an independent text which can be separated from its environment; rather, it is treated as a discourse of natural language use which should be analysed by considering two important elements: the literary text and the socio-cultural context of the work.

4. Conclusion

It is not always easy to define the form of literary language. Literary language often swings between two extremes: on the one hand, there are pieces of literature that use language which is no longer used in daily communication; on the other hand, there are literary works that use everyday language as their medium of expression. Whatever the forms of language being used, literature is a discourse of natural language use which cannot be separated from the context in which it occurs.

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