Non-literary language: stylistic aspects

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0. ABSTRACT

In the main, stylistics has focused on literary texts as the object of analysis. This chapter focuses on research that has applied methods from stylistics in the analysis of non-literary texts. The chapter provides an overview of the relevance that the field of stylistics has for the analysis of non-literary language, specifically spoken interaction. Creativity in interaction, the sociolinguistic concept of 'style' and fine-grained approaches to discourse analysis are all considered, and the chapter concludes with an account of reading group research and the ways in which readers co-create interpretations through interaction.

Keywords: conversation analysis, cognitive stylistics, creativity, dialogic syntax, reading groups, reader response, socio-cognitive, sociolinguistics, spoken interaction, style.

Key points and objectives:

- Examines the relevance of stylistic methods for the analysis of spoken interaction
- Considers the links between literary stylistics and sociolinguistic accounts of 'style', and explores the affinities between conversation analysis, dialogic syntax and (literary) stylistics
- Presents a showcase analysis of reading group discourse, applying dialogic syntax.

1. INTRODUCTION

Across this chapter we will consider how stylistics might be used in approaches to non-literary language. Firstly, we will consider what can be meant by the two terms used in the title of the chapter: 'non-literary language' and 'stylistics'. Following this, we will focus attention on particular methods of linguistic analysis that have become established in the field of discourse analysis and interactional studies, with the view of making connections between these approaches and the central tenets of

stylistics. We will explore these issues through working through analysis of short extracts of naturally-occurring conversation.

2. STYLISTICS: STYLE AND CREATIVITY

Stylistics promotes the detailed and meticulous linguistic analysis of texts. Most typically, this analysis has focused on how the language used creates effects for recipients, and the texts under investigation have often been literary. Classic volumes in the field take this approach, for instance Cluysenaar's *Introduction to Literary Stylistics* (1976), Short's *Exploring the Language of Poems, Plays and Prose* (1996), Simpson's *Stylistics: A Resource Book for Students* (2004), and Stockwell's *Cognitive Poetics* (2019). In addition to being focused on literary texts, these classic accounts promote the development of frameworks to be employed in analysis. These frameworks originated from some recognition, through linguistic analysis of literary texts, that language is used in patterned and coherent ways to create what we think of as 'literature'. As stylistics is interested both in the language inherent within texts and in the effects that this language has on recipients/receivers/readers, scholars working in the field have, from its origins, drawn on models from the fields of psychology and discourse processing. For example, early frameworks such as foregrounding is based on Gestalt psychology, while more recently developed frameworks have drawn on insights from cognitive psychology: e.g., conceptual metaphor theory, conceptual blending.

Literature has provided fertile ground for stylistic analysis. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, literary works (at least in a Global North context) are regarded as high quality, complex, and carefully constructed, producing an array of interpretations. For many, literature is special and that, amongst other features, the distinctive nature of literature comes from the extraordinary use of language: literary language draws attention to itself (Jakobson, 1960), it manipulates existing patterns through deviation (Shklovsky, 1965), and it favours the production of multiple interpretations. The second appeal of literary texts to those in stylistics is that, despite the complexity of literature, these texts are

constructed through language that is shared by a community of people. The works of Charles Dickens and Ali Smith may be different in many respects, but in both cases their texts are composed of language and, in this example, a language shared by a huge community of people: English. As a result, literature has offered a productive testing ground for exploring linguistic patterns that may be found more widely in language use. Thirdly, stylistics has been interested in literary texts due to wider shifts in the study of literature. Since the mid-20th century, in literary studies there has been a gradual movement away from a focus on the author and towards the text and/or the reader. Roland Barthes's famous aphorism, the 'Death of the Author' (1977), is, of course, not strictly true because plenty of literary scholars continue to focus on authors as sources of meaning, but more scholars have turned attention to the text and reader/readers as sites where meanings are produced and understood. As a result, stylistics and the approach it tends to favour (i.e., a focus on the language and on acts of reading), have emerged as popular ways of analysing literature.

Although predominantly employed in the analysis of literary texts, stylistic approaches, and the frameworks developed by scholars in the field, have been used extensively on non-literary texts (for an account, see Gibbons and Whiteley 2018). In fact, analyses of non-literary language have formed a key part of stylistics for many years (e.g., Crystal and Davy [1969] and Cook's [2001] account of the language of advertising) but accounts of non-literary texts and data have recently become more popular. For instance, scholars working at the intersection of education and linguistics have used stylistics to offer tools to educators (Giovanelli and Mason, 2015; Mason, 2016), while others have analysed media reports – for instance, of the 2008 financial crash (Browse, 2018) – using approaches from stylistics. Areas as far removed from literature as healthcare communication have also been subjected to analysis using stylistic methods and frameworks (e.g., Semino et al., 2018).

In his research into the creativity of everyday talk, Carter (2016) worked at the interface between stylistics and the study of non-literary language. His work on creativity in language has long demonstrated the value of applying stylistics approaches and frameworks to non-literary language. Carter was interested in whether literary language was special and distinct from other forms of language use, and he became specifically interested in the creativity of everyday language and the affinities that this form shares with 'literary' language (Carter, 2016). Carter applied insights from (literary) stylistics to what he termed 'common talk'. Carter argues that such 'everyday spoken language' is characterised not by mundanity and routineness but by creativity and difference (Carter 2016: 18), containing the same features we associate with literary texts: for example, repetition, idiom, metaphor, morphological innovation, and punning. As talk has a necessarily discursive quality, such examples of creativity are often the product of 'mutual interaction' rather than 'individual innovation' (Carter 2016: 102). As literary stylistics has tended to be interested in monologic texts (i.e., those written by an author for reader consumption), for Carter any 'stylistic' approach to interaction must be somewhat different, acknowledging the communicational quality of such language.

3. STYLE IN SOCIOLINGUISTICS

Carter's work attempted to account for aspects of everyday language that share linguistic features with literary texts and can therefore be described as creative. A related area of research is sociolinguistic work on 'style', an increasingly important focus of study (see Moore 2012 for a review). A person or group's style is 'a variable, as distinctive as class, region or gender' (Wales 2011: 397), and can refer to dress, tastes, and ways of talking. Hebdige (1979) argues that style is always somewhat subversive because it is distinct from what is seen as normal, although of course it is difficult to determine what constitutes a 'normal' style in speech, dress etc. This issue of distinctiveness is important in the sociolinguistic conception of style; an individual or group's style is what makes their talk characteristic and distinct from other individuals and groups that are otherwise similar (Irvine

2001). Compared to other sociolinguistic variables (e.g. gender and class), style, as a purely linguistic variable, is more under the control of the speaker and can demonstrate an individual's desire to belong to a group or wish to be distinct. Thus, Coupland defines style as ‘a way of doing something’ (2007: 1): for example, an individual or group's particular way of achieving interactional aims, producing an identity, or conducting a particular type of talk.

The sociolinguistic study of style considers individual and group shifts in language use that transcend prototypical usage and the consequent social meanings (Moore 2004: 376). Much research in this area has focused on the observation and recording of teenagers and young adults, as style distinctiveness is probably most evident in these age groups. The classics in the field of sociolinguistic style focus on these younger groups in educational contexts: Eckert’s (2000) account of ‘jocks’ and ‘burnouts’ in a US High School; Moore’s (2004) study of teenage girls in a school in Bolton, UK; Snell's (2010) study of Teesside English as used by younger children; and Kirkham's (2011) analysis of university classroom discourse. As an example of the kind of work undertaken in this field we will explore Pratt’s (2023) recent study of style in a US High School. Following this we will look at the connections between this field and the work of those working in literary stylistics.

Pratt’s ethnographic study (2023) focused on a High School in the US in which pupils undertook some artistic training: e.g., music, dance, visual art. She was interested in the ways that pupils’ modes of speaking (i.e., their style of speaking) produced distinct *affects* of ‘chill’ or ‘high energy’ that, for the pupils, were connected to attitudes towards their education and their career prospects. Pratt (2023) focused specifically on three linguistic features: vocal creak (a distinct feature of some US forms of English used by younger speakers), speech rate, and body movement whilst speaking. She found that students who identifeid as ‘chill’ or low-energy used more creak in their speech, slower speech-rates and more postural stillness (Pratt 2023: 19). By contrast, students who associated with high-energy

and louder identities produced less vocal creak, faster speech-rates and were less still during interviews (2023: 19). The overall affected states produced, of being chill or being high-energy, have currency and meaning within younger generations and were associated with the different groups' attitudes towards their schooling. Whereas the 'high-energy' group were strongly attached to their education, and were committed to moving on to attending college, the 'chill' group positioned themselves as 'outside the academic and artistic endeavors of the school' (Pratt 2023: 19).

Pratt's (2023) account follows other sociolinguistic studies of 'style' in everyday language use: the pupils' language styles are agentive and index the social groups they belong to and the attitudes they share towards other groups and institutions. In some senses, this might seem quite far removed from the main concerns of literary stylistics, but fundamentally both fields see style in language as something that is distinctive and discernible, and that patterns of language use work in combination to produce stylistic effects, whether that is the use of conceptual metaphor in a poem or a teenager's use of tag questions. In practice, literary writers and genres become associated with styles, and this creates distinction from other writers and other genres. This process shares similarities with individuals or groups in society who seek to differentiate themselves from other individuals or other groups, through language choices, dress and/or behaviour.

So far we have considered stylistic aspects of non-literary language through focusing on studies looking at creativity in 'common talk' (Carter, 2016) and then discussing the concept and application of 'style' within variationist sociolinguistics (e.g., Eckert, 2000; Pratt, 2023). Next, we will now move on to consider work in another discipline of linguistics, Conversation Analysis (henceforth CA). CA has argued for the systematic analysis of naturally-occurring talk and while there are significant differences between stylistics and CA, this focus on unearthing the underlying patterns of language binds the two together.

4. STYLE IN TALK 1: CONVERSATION ANALYSIS

CA is the study of naturally-occurring conversation, and was the first approach to consider casual conversation to be a worthy object of study. Arguing against the prevailing views of the time, Sacks (1984) believed that conversation was worth studying because there is order underlying human activity:

> [I]f...we figure or guess or decide that whatever humans do, they are just another animal after all, maybe more complicated than others but perhaps not noticeably so, then whatever humans do can be examined to discover some way they do it (Sacks 1984: 22)

For CA, conversation is a highly-organised system (Edwards 1997: 85-6) and meaning can be found in elements of structure, such as how turn-taking operates and how different speech acts are tied together. The social action performed by an utterance depends on its sequential position in talk (ten Have 1999: 6). In this way, it is possible to identify similarities between the methods of literary stylistics and CA: both are interested in structural features both attempt to be rigorous and systematic in analysis, and neither (traditionally) seek to be associated with particular critical ideologies favoured by alternative methodologies (Schegloff, 1997; Simpson, 2004; Stockwell, 2019).

Studies in CA have been concerned with various forms of interactional phenomena, from how questions are asked to the role of speaker gaze during talk. One speech act that has been discussed at some length is that of assessments: how people go about giving, and responding to, assessments or evaluations of objects (e.g., people, films, food etc.). We will now turn attention to CA research on assessments and then related work in the field of dialogic syntax on stance. Providing this background will allow us to move on to a subsequent discussion of a specific example of non-literary language that has relevance for the field of stylistics: readers' responses to literary texts.

Assessments are ubiquitous, particularly in certain interactional contexts such as informal conversation between friends and between family members and in particular specialised contexts like book forums on the internet and classrooms. Pomerantz (1984) discusses assessments extensively, noting that an assessment produced by one speaker generally leads to another assessment produced by a different speaker (see also Goodwin and Goodwin, 1992). Pomerantz (1984) uses this discussion of assessments as part of her account of preference organization, and specifically the 'preference for agreement' that was first introduced by Sacks (1992). Pomerantz noted that once an assessment is produced by one speaker it is expected that a second speaker will also produce an assessment of the target object. Furthermore, the second speaker will design their utterance such as to display their level of agreement/disagreement with the first assessment. Assessments are distinctive as speech acts because they make agreement and disagreement relevant. Assessments in the second position that involve the second speaker agreeing with the first speaker will tend to highlight and foreground this agreement, while disagreeing assessments in the second position will usually seek to minimize the extent of the disagreement. In practice, this means that agreeing assessment sequences will be contiguous (i.e., the second assessment will likely follow on quickly from the first assessment, with minimal gap between turns at talk), the agreement will take up the whole turn, and the turn will be prefaced with an explicit agreeing token (e.g., 'yes', 'of course', 'definitely'). By contrast, disagreeing assessment sequences will often involve the second assessment being delayed, with a gap coming before the articulation of the disagreeing assessment, the disagreement may leave out the disagreeing token (e.g., 'no'), and may use an agreeing preface to the disagreement (e.g., 'yes, but you're wrong') (Pomerantz, 1984).

5. STYLE IN TALK 2: DIALOGIC SYNTAX

This focus on assessments in CA has led to the development of research on stance. Stance refers to displays of 'feelings, attitudes, value judgements, or assessments' (Biber et al. 1999: 966) that may be 'communicated explicitly or implicitly' (Stivers 2008: 37). Analysis of stance is predominantly presented in the field of dialogic syntax, an approach to interactional language that is based on the dialogic approaches associated with Bakhtin (1984) and Linell (2009). Dialogism stresses that language, and then meaning that comes from it, is fundamentally situated in context and is always intersubjective, following 'shared procedures of interpretation and negotiation' (Linell 2009: 47). It is opposed to transfer models of communication and meaning-making that are associated with more traditional, 'monologic' approaches to language. Dialogic syntax emerged as a method of analysis from this theory of dialogism and was developed mainly by Du Bois (2007, 2014). Dialogic syntax involves the analysis of interaction, particularly assessments and stance-taking in talk, by focusing on the patterns and rules that emerge across multiple turns at talk. It aims to explore how speakers' utterances work together to produce shared meanings and understandings through parallelism and resonance. Parallelism is found in repetition and echoing, when speakers reuse the syntax, prosody and/or lexis of other speakers (see also, Tannen 1989). When this parallelism occurs, this can create resonance between speakers, where speakers recognise 'affinities' between their utterances and the utterances of others (Du Bois 2014: 372). Such resonance is most overt when occurring across shorter extracts of talk but can be found across longer stretches as well (Siromaa 2012: 541).

For the remainder of this chapter, we will consider a study that applied dialogic syntax to a reading group's response to a poem (Peplow and Whiteley, 2021). This account offers one example of how a form of non-literary language, in this case spoken interaction, can be analysed in a way that is attentive to the production of linguistic patterns. Additionally, the findings from this study tell us something about the ways in which reading and literary interpretation works.

Analysing reading group discourse has become a key part of the cognitive stylistic approach to literature (Peplow, 2016; Peplow et al., 2016; Swann and Allington, 2009). Collecting and analysing reading groups' responses to texts has formed one way that researchers in this field have been able to further our understanding of how reading occurs in practice. As an example, Peplow and Whiteley's (2021) study looked at how readers discussed poetry in groups, specifically how interpretations were generated collaboratively. The reading group discussed is referred to as 'Andy's Group', and is an all-male group based in an affluent neighbourhood, who meet monthly. This group had experience of reading and discussing poetry in their group. The upcoming analysis centres on the group's discussion of a particular poem, 'Upon opening the chest freezer' by Simon Armitage (2010). The poem focuses on the breakdown of a romantic relationship between 'Damian' and the unnamed narrator. Damian seems to be a conceptual artist, and the narrator describes their increasing annoyance at Damian's focus on his artwork. The poem describes an annual 'stunt' in which Damian collects a 'ginormous' snowball at the end of winter, stores it in his freezer, and then deposits 'his snowball at a bus stop or crossroads' during the summer. To let Damian know that they are 'leaving' the narrator gaffer-tapes a note to the inside of the chest freezer, where the snowballs are kept, for Damian to find.

The participants in Andy's Group experienced a lot of difficulty in understanding Armitage's poem, and in their analysis Peplow and Whiteley (2021) show how the group collectively co-constructs possible meanings of the text. In doing this, the group propose a metaphorical reading of the poem. This is started in the extract reproduced below, which occurs at the beginning of the group's discussion of the poem:

Figure 1: *Conversational extract*

1	Mike	I ha- (0.5) had diff- difficulty with this one heh (0.5) I didn't (.) <get it> really
2	Wes	= well the first part is a direct reference to Andy [Goldsworthy's work
3	Mike	[Andy Goldsworthy yep yeah
4	Wes	in fact °I don't know if anyone is interested xxx I've got it with me° *<rustling papers>*
5	Ron	did you see them at the [sculpture park
6	Simon	oh seriously

((group talks about Andy Goldsworthy installation))

7 Joe I thought it sounded like Banksy stunt actually
8 Many [yeah
9 Simon [oh right
10 Ron [yeah it was brilliant though
11 Simon oh excellent OK good alright well that doesn't detract [for me
12 Mike [well that's where [his inspiration is
13 Simon [yeah that's good
14 Mike and there's nothing not to get there (.) but it's this (1.5) it's this (0.5) what seems to be a diminishing snowball being used for other things (0.5) erm (1.5) you know (.) >"a scoop here and scraping there slush puppies for next door's kids a lemon sorbet< an ice pack margaritas" (.) it's all the use of ice for other things other than the art (0.5) until it's all gone and I (1.0) I (.) didn't get that bit
15 Andy I wondered actually- this is about the 17th time I've read it I think probably (0.5) because I didn't get it first time at all (0.5) >other than it sounded quite funny< (1.0) erm my foc- (0.5) I was focusing first of all on the idea of him (.) you know (.) photographing people being amazed about this snowball
16 ? Mm
17 Andy that's- and then I wondered about the freezer really and erm (0.5) it's another couple isn't it by the way [it's another couple
18 ? [yeah yeah
19 ? [mm
20 Andy err someone's leaving by the sound of it she [leaves him a note
21 Ron [his wife yeah
22 Andy >I imag- I imagine that it's a she anyway but maybe not< but it says "I'm through playing housewife" but you know but um she's leaving so let's say (0.5) and she's fed up with his fooling around (.) which she's kind of tolerated but
23 ? Yeah
24 Andy >she's just so fed up of it< (.) and erm (.) it feels like the er (.) the chicken thighs and the petit pois (.) are all that remains of the relationship (.) or you could say that the diminishing snowball (.) as it disappears (.) is all that's left you know until there's actually nothing left and then she leaves (2.0) and then there's that [other thing about the col-
25 Simon [there's nothing left in the chest freezer which represents their (.) [relationship
26 Ron [relationship
27 Andy Yeah
28 Simon is that what you're saying
29 Andy yeah and then there's something about coldness isn't there and the ["the true scald

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30    Simon                        [oh yeah
31    Andy   = of Antarctica's breath" you know (1.0)
32    Simon  and that's anger [xxx
33    Andy                   [that's anger
34    Simon  that's a [great line
35    Andy            [yes (laugh) I [suppose it is yeah
36    Simon                          [fantastic <ending> to the
            piece
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Peplow and Whiteley (2021: 32) note that Andy's group experience some difficulty with the poem, and that they overcome this difficulty by collaboratively piecing together knowledge that leads to interpretations of the text (2021: 33). Early in this extract (lines 2-7) the group make links between the actions of Damian and the real conceptual artist Andy Goldsworthy, who placed giant snowballs in public places as part of his 'Midsummer Snowballs' artwork. Once the group has discussed the relevance of Goldsworthy's art, three members of the group move on to co-construct an interpretation of the poem that sees metaphorical connections between the events described in the poem and the couple's relationship (Peplow and Whiteley 2021: 33). In particular, the group discusses the metaphorical connections between the freezer and its associations (i.e., coldness, now empty) and the couple's relationship (i.e., anger, empty and without meaning).

Using the methods of dialogic syntax in the analysis of the extract, Peplow and Whiteley (2021: 33) argue that interactional parallelism between the speakers is important to the creation of this co-constructed meaning. Across several lines of the talk, different members of the group echo and recycle utterances, both the form and the content. The utterances produced by Andy, Simon and Ron between turns 24-36 show this most acutely. Across these utterances there are the following parallelisms:

- a clustering of parallel existential clauses with repetition: 'there's actually nothing left', 'there's nothing left' (turns 24 and 25) - see Figure 2;
- the grammatically echoic yet semantically opposite 'there's something' (turn 29) - see Figure 2;
- repetition of the pronoun + copular verb + noun phrase structure of 'that's anger' (turns 32 and 33) and 'that's a great line' (turn 34) - see Figure 3.

Using dialogic syntax, these parallelisms can be represented using 'diagraphs'. The diagraph allows analysts to see how the syntactic, semantic and prosodic elements of sequential utterances relate, demonstrating alignment across speakers' utterances. Diagraphs are therefore useful at showing the jointly-constructed nature of interaction and how turns at talk resonate with each other.:

Figure 2: *Diagraph for turns 24, 25, 26, and 29*

Andy;	there	's	actually	nothing				
				left				
Simon;	there	's		nothing	in the	which	their	relationship
				left	chest	represents		
					freezer			
Ron;								relationship
…	…	…	…	…	…	…	…	…
Andy;	there	's		Something				

Figure 3: *Diagraph for turns 32-34*

Simon;	That	's	Anger
Andy;	That	's	Anger
Simon;	That	's	a great line

Peplow and Whiteley (2021) argue that this parallelism demonstrates that members of the group are 'closely monitoring' each other's contributions, producing utterances – and wider interpretations of the poem – based on what others are saying. Drawing on conceptual metaphor theory (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Stockwell 2019), Peplow and Whiteley (2021) focus on the metaphorical readings of the poem that are produced collaboratively by members of the group, where the phrases in capitals are the underlying conceptual metaphorical phenomena. Andy initially identifies a link between between the CHEST FREEZER in the poem and the RELATIONSHIP of the poetic voice and Damian (turn 24). Andy specifies that CONTENTS OF THE FREEZER can be mapped onto the QUALITY OF THE RELATIONSHIP: e.g., the emptying freezer is symbolic of the increasingly damaged relationship. Across turns 25 and 28, Simon reiterates the metaphor established by Andy to make it even more visible: 'There's nothing left in the chest freezer that represents their relationship… is that what you're

saying'. The parallelism here creates resonance between the members of the group, and this happens particularly through the echoing and the recycling of the aforementioned conceptual metaphor.

6. CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have explored some of the ways in which non-literary forms of language can be analysed using methods that fall under the remit of stylistics or cognitive stylistics, and methods that have affinities with the approach and ethos of (cognitive) stylistics. We have looked at different versions of, and approaches to, style and stylistics across various areas of linguistics and interactional studies. Our main object of discussion and analysis has been on a particular form of non-literary language: talk and interaction. Of course, this was necessarily selective but in many ways talk provides a useful testing ground for some of the key stylistic principles because it is, on the face of it, very far removed from the written mode of more traditional stylistic analyses. At the end of the chapter, we considered socio-cognitive research that has sought to bring together the concerns of more traditional stylistic analysis and interactional studies (e.g. Peplow and Whiteley, 2021). The application of dialogic syntax to spoken interaction from a reading group provides one way of exploring the patterns that underlie interaction and the connections that these might have to a more typical concern of stylistics: how readers interpret the language of a literary text.

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