

## A brief history of stylistics

### *Russian Formalism*

Stylistics can trace its roots to the formalist tradition that developed in Russian literary criticism at the turn of the twentieth-century, particularly in the work of the Moscow Linguistic Circle. Its most famous member and the most well-known exponent of Russian Formalism was Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) whose work focused on defining the qualities of what he termed 'poetic language'. According to Jakobson, the poetic function of language is realised in those communicative acts where the focus is on the message for its own sake (as opposed, say, to a communicative act focussed on conveying the emotions of the speaker). Jakobson's work was to have tremendous influence on the development of stylistics, not least as a result of his varied academic career and the opportunities it afforded for the cross-fertilisation of ideas.



### *Prague Structuralism*



Following Jakobson's emigration to Czechoslovakia in 1920, he began collaborating with Czech literary scholars such as Jan Mukařovský (1891-1975), establishing the Prague Linguistic Circle in 1926 which was to become famous as the birthplace of structuralism. Like Jakobson, Mukařovský was interested in identifying the formal and functional distinctions between literary and non-literary writing, noting that literary texts deviate from what he termed the 'standard language' (Mukařovský 1964). According to Mukařovský, the consequence of such deviation is the creation of a defamiliarising effect for the reader, something he claimed to be one of the hallmarks of literature. In turn, Jakobson (1960) suggests that defamiliarisation also results from structural patterning in texts, or, to give it its later name, parallelism. Shklovsky's (1917, 1925) notion of defamiliarisation ('estrangement') or 'making strange' also entailed a political notion because he stressed that the function of art is to make people look at the world from a new perspective. These concepts – deviation, parallelism and foregrounding – are the foundations of contemporary stylistics.

### *European developments*

Jakobson's work with the Prague structuralists was interrupted by the Second World War, which forced him into an extended period as an itinerant scholar. After several years in Denmark, Norway and Sweden he finally settled in America in 1941. This move to the US was crucial to the spread of his ideas to scholars in Europe and America, and to the later development of the New Criticism and Practical Criticism movements in America and Britain respectively. This, though, is to get ahead of ourselves. Almost in tandem with the work of the formalist and structuralist movements, developments in the linguistic study of literature were being made by continental European scholars. Chief among these was Leo Spitzer, an Austrian philologist interested in the literature of the Romance languages. In Spitzer's work (e.g. Spitzer 1948) we see an approach that will be familiar to any modern stylistician; namely, the concept of starting with an interpretation of a literary text and then using a linguistic analysis to validate or invalidate that initial hypothesis. Spitzer rejected purely impressionistic criticism and his work may thus be seen as a forerunner to later work in stylistics which embraced the scientific notion of objectivity in analysis. Alongside Spitzer, other important scholars working in this tradition included Auerbach, Bally and Guiraud, whose work was to have an influence on the development of the French tradition of *analyse de texte*. While this approach is more intuitive than would be accepted by today's stylisticians, there is undoubtedly a relation here to contemporary stylistics.



### *New and Practical Criticism*



Of these two groups of scholars – characterised by Jakobson on the one hand and Spitzer on the other – it was the former which was to have the most immediate impact on the development of modern stylistics. Russian Formalism influenced the development of the two movements we have already mentioned – New Criticism in America and Practical Criticism in Britain. Both of these approaches were characterised by a focus on the language of the text, though New Criticism (exemplified in the work of Brooks and Warren) was concerned with the description of the aesthetic qualities of a literary text while Practical Criticism (developed in the work of I. A. Richards) was



interested in the psychological aspects of how readers comprehend texts. Both essentially proceeded on the techniques of close reading and while this approach is viewed by today's stylisticians as too imprecise in analytical terms, David West has pointed out that the concern of Practical Criticism with readers' processing of texts makes it a direct precursor of contemporary cognitive stylistics.

While the formalist and structuralist work of Jakobson and others is not without problems, it should be clear that its value is in the insights that it generated and the later approaches it inspired. Indeed, insights from formalism have proved essential for modern stylistics, with the concepts of deviation, parallelism and foregrounding still acting as the linchpins of contemporary approaches to the discipline. Willie van Peer has provided empirical support for Mukařovský's notion of foregrounding while Geoffrey Leech has demonstrated convincingly that foregrounding in texts is intrinsic to literary interpretation. The connection between analysis and interpretation is strengthened by Leech's concepts of congruence and cohesion of foregrounding, which goes some considerable way towards refuting accusations of interpretative positivism often levelled at stylistics by its critics and robustly defended by stylisticians like Mick Short. And in recent work in cognitive stylistics, foregrounding has been related directly to the cognitive concepts of figure and ground.

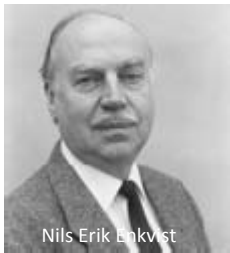
#### *The impact of Chomskyan linguistics*

Since stylistics draws so heavily on linguistics, a history of its development would not be complete without some reference to the work of Noam Chomsky. Although Chomsky's concerns were never with literary texts and their effects, his influence on the development of linguistics inevitably impacts on stylistics. The work of Thorne, Halle and Keyser and Ohmann are exemplars of early stylistics that proceeds on the assumption that literary texts constitute instances of linguistic transformations of some underlying structure. To these we can add Levin's work on linguistic structures in poetry. Indeed, Graham Hough wrote in 1969 that the contribution of linguistics to literary study is 'virtually confined to semantics and syntax', therein reflecting the dominance of Chomskyan linguistics at the time he was writing.

#### *Explorations in non-literary stylistics*

While stylistics had so far concentrated on using linguistic tools to explain literary effects, it had also been the subject of criticism for its eclecticism, its lack of a methodological and theoretical

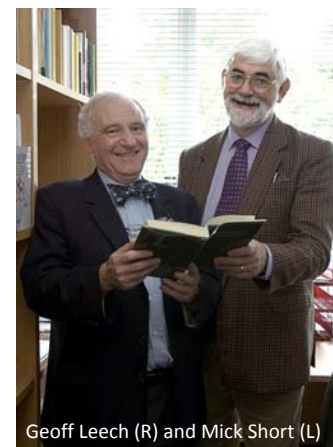
foundation, and its alleged base in literary criticism. A major focus on poetry also caused some suspicion in linguistic circles. In the 1960s and early seventies these criticisms were addressed in part



through the development of a branch of stylistics that focused particularly on style in non-literary language. The work of Crystal and Davy, and Enkvist, is particularly important here. Crystal and Davy's concern was how particular social contexts restrict the range of linguistic options open to speakers, while Enkvist proposed that this could work the other way too; i.e. that a speaker's stylistic choices could affect the context for his or her addressees (think, for instance, about the informal lexis and grammar often used in adverts for high street banks, and how this is designed to effect a context of informality for customers). Work in non-literary stylistics, however, appeared to stall at this point, and it was not until much later that it picked up again. The reasons for this are perhaps the lack of linguistic frameworks able to deal with the contextual issues at the heart of Crystal and Davy's and Enkvist's work.

#### *Systemic-functional linguistics and stylistics*

The basis of stylistics in linguistics has always meant that an advance in the latter inevitably impacts on the former, and so it was in the 1970s and early eighties. Some of the attacks levelled at stylistics were circumvented by its becoming particularly practical and by the movement of stylistics into the areas of language teaching and pedagogical stylistics. Furthermore, Halliday's work on systemic functional grammar related form to function within the context of the language system as a whole and had particular influence on the study of prose fiction. For example, Roger Fowler (whose own *Essays on Style and Language*, 1966, is a seminal work in early stylistics), used Hallidayan-style transitivity analysis to uncover point of view patterns in text. The influence of Halliday's work can also be seen in Leech and Short's now famous *Style in Fiction*.



#### *The impact of pragmatics and discourse analysis*

During the late seventies and early eighties, advances were also made in the developing field of pragmatics, where the focus was on how context affects meaning. Carter and Simpson (1989) is an exemplar of how this work influenced the development of stylistics in the 1980s. These advances

enabled for the first time the serious stylistic study of drama. Burton (1980) is an early attempt at using pragmatic and sociolinguistic insights in the study of dramatic discourse, and Short's (1981) article on discourse analysis applied to drama is a groundbreaking study of how such insights can be used to uncover aspects of characterisation. Advances in pragmatics and their concern with context also facilitated a renewed interest in non-literary stylistics (see Carter and Nash's *Seeing Through Language*) and the ideology-shaping nature of texts (e.g. Roger Fowler's *Linguistic Criticism*). There is a crossover here, of course, with work in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), though CDA-inspired work that is unremittingly stylistic in approach continues today.

### *From cognition to corpora*

Into the 1990s there was a growing concern with the cognitive elements involved in comprehending and processing texts, and this movement gave rise to the branch of the discipline now generally known as cognitive stylistics or cognitive poetics. Of course, all forms of stylistic analysis have always considered text comprehension to a certain extent, and in this respect current work in cognitive stylistics can be seen as directly related to earlier investigations into the ways in which readers process texts. Among such earlier work is the Practical Criticism of I. A. Richards and the later reader-response work of, for example, Fairly and Alderson and Short. Advances in computer technology in recent years have also had a significant impact on the direction in which stylistics is heading. The construction and analysis of large-scale linguistic corpora is easier than ever before and this has enabled a return to some of the original concerns of stylistics – namely, the extent to which foregrounding is quantifiable and whether authorial style really is as distinguishable as critics have claimed. These were questions that were largely unanswerable before the development of corpus linguistics. Nowadays, the ease with which it is possible to analyse a text computationally means that there is almost no excuse not to use evidence from corpus studies to support qualitative analysis.

Stylistics, then, has come a long way since its beginnings and it should be clear that it is very much a forward-looking discipline. As such, there is clearly much to look forward to as stylistics continues to develop.