

# Stylistics

PETER VERDONK  
Oxford University Press 2002

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Stylistics is generally regarded as the formal analysis of style and its variations in speech and writing. It emerged from the study of classical rhetoric and developed as an area of literary studies that came to be included in modern linguistics, particularly in the last fifty years. In the history of literary criticism, the prescription of style gave way to its description and analysis. The study of style in modern literary studies was initially set in historical periods, with attention directed to authors as specific exponents of distinctive methods of writing. In recent decades, poststructuralist thought, notably deconstruction, has emphasised the multiple and elusive ways of reading texts. In contrast, the growth of stylistics, often considered mechanical and methodical, has pointed to the ways in which linguistic analysis could offer support to literary criticism in the interpretation of texts.

Nevertheless *style* remains a questionable word. It has generated extensive argument over centuries of use and its pervasive adoption in contemporary society has rendered its referents diffuse. What does *Style* mean when it is used by a quality daily newspaper as the title of a supplement that contains articles on aspects of contemporary life as well as book reviews? Peter Verdonk, however, asserts that we use the word 'so commonly in our everyday conversation and writing that it seems unproblematic' (p 3), a claim which leads to his discussion of 'style in language' or 'distinctive linguistic expression' (p 3). His definition of stylistics follows: 'the study of style, ... the analysis of distinctive expression in language and the description of its purpose and effect' (p 4).

*Stylistics* belongs to the Oxford series *Introductions to Language Study*, under the editorship of H.G. Widdowson. Nine other works are listed to date, on second language acquisition, language and culture, language testing, phonetics, historical linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, pragmatics and linguistics. Widdowson's preface explains the purpose of the series, to meet 'a need for a more general and gradual introduction to language: transitional texts which will ease people into an understanding of complex ideas' (p ix). The series has been designed with considerable attention to format and detail. Each work contains a survey of the area, readings, references and a glossary. Students of language and others wishing to extend their reading will find these studies generally useful.

The survey develops Verdonk's major premise, that 'a close attention to specific linguistic features of text can serve not only to substantiate an impressionistic sense of meaning, but also to suggest the possibilities of reading different interpretations into a text, of both an individual and a social significance' (p 78). He introduces the reader to the concept of style, stressing the importance of choice in the creation of effect. The contexts of style may be linguistic or non-linguistic, and our familiarity with the circumstances of the variety of texts we encounter is a crucial element in our socialisation. The numerous text types can be broadly divided into the literary and the non-literary, the difference between them explicable in terms of reference to discourse: literary texts are 'self-enclosed' whereas non-literary ones are connected 'with the context of our everyday social practice' (p 21). Both poetry and prose fiction can be read with perspective being inferred from textual characteristics, but 'the most problematic issue in stylistics' (p 30) is that of varying perspective and its relationship to textual features. Perspective can be related to the grammatical concept of person, an approach that leads to an analysis of modes of representing speech and thought. Stylistics can complement literary criticism by examining how the significance of a poem, for example, can be emphasised by reference to its linguistic features. It can also support the social interpretation of texts according to the ideological position of the reader. Brief reference to Marxism, feminist stylistics and post-colonial perspectives precede the final section on critical discourse analysis, whose approach is illustrated by discussion of some examples from the British press. In Verdonk's examination of stylistics, readers are 'active agents' rather than 'passive receptacles', always capable of 'producing their own representations' (p 77).

The list of readings provides twenty references in the recent history of stylistics. The significance of all but one, a reference book, is given in an abstract. Extracts from each follow, with questions designed to probe the significance of the work and specific issues in stylistics. Some questions interrogate Verdonk's text. Each reference is linked to one of the chapters.

The third section, a list of 27 references, contains bibliographical details of works in the field. Most are linked to specific chapters. Brief comments indicate their individual importance, with each graded according to level (introductory, advanced and specialised). Cross-references link half of these works to the numbered texts in the list of readings. The fourth section, the glossary, lists key words given in bold type in the survey with an intricate set of cross-references: to numbered texts, pages and other key words in the glossary.

Verdonk has gone to considerable lengths to construct a text that is attentive to detail, logic and clarity. Felicity disappears, however, when some terminology becomes jargon with matching acronyms, such as 'free indirect discourse (FID)'. Had he been less selective and analysed, for example, some problematic aspects of contemporary syntax he might not have referred to 'indispensable elements in a dynamic contextualised interaction' (p 27). Having distinguished between literary and non-literary texts, he neglects the latter in pursuit of his demonstration of the central premise, which is hardly new. There is no explicit discussion of register, which is excluded from the glossary. Some recognition of the impact of the Internet on textual studies would have been welcome. Those who have turned to stylistics in search of answers to many of the questions that arise in the teaching of English as a second language will find that the field of stylistics, itself a twentieth-century invention, has reinvented itself as a discipline in the last two decades or so. Along the way it has moved 'from its formalist beginnings to the contextualised, discourse-based approaches practised nowadays' (p 110). Valuable work from earlier traditions of inquiry, such as G.W. Turner's *Stylistics* (1973, 1988), appears to have been set aside, even though the first text in the list of readings is from Graham Hough's *Style and Stylistics* (1969). The result is a book that is less than the rubric that its series promises. This is not an introduction to stylistics so much as a demonstration of how a particular approach to contemporary stylistics can be applied. Painstakingly methodical and highly directive, *Stylistics* is, nevertheless, a book with blinkers. Readers who are 'active agents' may wish to point its numerous signposts in some other directions.

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