

# Stylistics and second language learning

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*Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree.*

(Ezra Pound, *How To Read*, Part II.)

## 1. Introduction

In the past ten years or so, there has been renewed interest in using literature in the second language classroom. Books and articles on the subject have proliferated, and now teachers who wish to incorporate literature into their classes have a selection of resource books and theoretical articles at their disposal, for example Bassnett and Grundy (1993), Carter and Long (1991), Collie and Slater (1987), Duff and Maley (1990), Gower (1990), and Lazar (1993). Some of these texts recommend the use of literature only with students at an intermediate level and above, while others mention linguistic and literary theories which provide new ways of approaching literature. This article combines elements of methodology, pedagogy and linguistic and literary theory to argue that literature may improve the language skills of students at all levels.

## 2. Stylistics

*Stylistics: the branch of knowledge dealing with linguistic or literary style.* (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd edition)

Anyone learning a language must acquire both the complex rules of grammar, or linguistic competence, and the complex rules for the appropriate social use of language, or communicative competence. Linguistic competence ensures that what is said is grammatical, and communicative competence ensures that the message is appropriate. Both types of competence are essential if the user of the language is to communicate effectively. Messages must be produced in accordance with systems of social convention in order to be understood. The purpose of stylistics is "to discover what linguistic units count as in communication and how the effects of different conventions reveal themselves in the way messages are organised in texts" (Widdowson 1996: 138).

Stylistics uses linguistic analysis to understand exactly how messages are conveyed, and in so doing provides a bridge between linguistics and literary criticism. Linguists study the codes in which messages are transmitted, but are not concerned with "what linguistic units count as in communication". In the evaluation and interpretation of literary texts language is a secondary consideration for the critic, who relies on intuition and impressions based in supposedly universal aesthetic values. Such intuitions are generally considered to be unavailable to the second language learner, but the grammatical knowledge fundamental to stylistic analysis is familiar, and stylistics can show learners how particular linguistic forms function to communicate specific messages. Beginning with familiar grammatical and phonological terminology, students can reach and justify their own literary interpretations. In addition, stylistics "not only helps students to use their existing knowledge of the language to understand and appreciate literary texts, it also deepens their knowledge of the language itself" (Lazar 1993: 32).

### 3.1 Literature and everyday language

Children usually begin to speak sometime between nine months and three years old. Their first attempts at speech are strings of vowel sounds (*a-a-a-a*), and later they produce strings of consonant-vowel combinations (*ma-ma-ma*, *da-da-da*, *ba-ba-ba*) which are often taken for their first words. When young children begin to say other words, their versions often differ from the adult form. Phonological variations are particularly noteworthy, where consonant clusters are simplified (/pu:n/ for spoon), harmonies abound (/ʃ i f / for fish), phoneme order is changed (/efələnt/ for elephant) and the first unstressed syllable of polysyllabic words is eliminated (/brelə/ for umbrella). Often a combination of these simplifying rules is applied to a single word, to produce versions like /kloptə/ for helicopter, both swapping phonemes around and reducing the number of syllables (Bassnett and Grundy 1993: 8). The phonology of child language is much more harmonious, indeed poetic, than that of adult language.

As Bassnett and Grundy have noted (op. cit., p. 6ff.), even everyday adult language has more poetic features than is at first apparent. For example, the lexis of English has been marked by the British obsession with the weather. There are many verbs which describe light, or light on water - *shine*, *shimmer*, *sparkle*, *glisten*, *glimmer*, *gleam*, *glitter* - a word-choard which has no parallel in most European languages, and which students above the elementary level should know about. This myriad of near-synonyms allows great variety of expression. Indeed, the weather features strongly in a lot of English literature. There are poems about wind and rain, about sun and clouds, about the way the weather parallels emotional states. In prose too, the weather plays a big part. Consider the wind in *Wuthering Heights*, the fog in *Bleak House*, or the rain in Thomas Hardy's work. From an everyday topic like the weather it has been a simple process to move into the work of some of the greatest English novelists. In the same way, "anyone learning English moves into literature because literature is a high point of language usage; arguably it marks the greatest skills a language user can demonstrate" (ibid., p. 7).

Language is an enormously complex, rich and variable instrument, even in its more mundane uses. It is virtually the medium in which humans exist, defining our identity, our relation with others, and our culture. It is inconceivable that a poet or novelist should divorce him or herself from the language of our everyday lives. So literary expression is an enhancement of the resources of language which we use from day to day.

### 3.2 Language and literature

After acquiring some knowledge of a language, learners need to know something about what can be done with it. One of the best ways of exploring the potential of the language is to turn to literature, to the work of writers who are arguably the most skilful users and explorers of language.

When we teach literature, what we are actually teaching is highly skilful language usage....When we teach English, we are not only teaching a language, but we are also teaching students about what that language can do.

(Bassnett and Grundy 1993 : 7)

Although everyday language is often more literary than we at first realise, it is nonetheless true that literature is "outside" grammatical and social conventions in a variety of

senses. Unlike normal messages, whose significance is largely derived from social context, literary messages are complete in themselves: they presuppose no preceding events and anticipate no future action. Literary messages can be described as being outside the social matrix. Their use of the code, especially in poetry, is often deviant in terms of normal usage. Since literary messages are not governed by social conventions nor the rules of the code, how they communicate at all is an interesting question, and one which stylistic analysis is able to answer.

Deviations from the code diminish the meaning of language, but this deficiency is compensated for because the deviant item is placed in a pattern where it acquires meaning by relation to other items within the internal context of the message. Language in literature derives meaning from extra-textual relations to the code, and intra-textual relations between language items in the context itself, so forming a kind of hybrid unit. This is not a simple example of denotation and connotation, since the intra-textual relations are systematic and do not demonstrate the personal and idiosyncratic associations generally assigned to connotative meanings.

### **3.3 Pedagogy**

Traditionally, literary criticism has been seen as a branch of aesthetics. Texts are judged as artistic wholes, by reference to artistic value. This traditional type of literary criticism is implicitly based on a theory of aesthetics which postulates artistic universals. Here the problem for second language learners arises. If literature can be criticised by reference to artistic universals, then it should be possible to determine exactly what these universals are, and establish a metalanguage for their description. However, these universals are never made explicit, and literary critics continue to expound intuitions using an impressionistic terminology which relies on the audience sharing their assumptions about implicit artistic universals. Few second language learners have reached a point where they can share these assumptions, and so the traditional critic's appeal to intuitions finds no response.

Stylistics helps overcome this problem by concentrating on patterns of language use in texts, and giving artistic value an incidental role. By considering the language first, stylistics can identify those linguistic patterns which ultimately are the source of intuitions about artistic value. It enables the students' own aesthetic appreciation by making them aware of features of the text without dictating an accepted reading.

### **3.4 Theory**

#### **3.4.1 Second language acquisition theory**

The theory of second language acquisition which postulates a language learning device is relevant to using literature in second language teaching. This device bears a resemblance to that used in acquiring the syntax and phonology of a first language, and second language learners are similarly more open to the harmonies and the poetic features of a language at this stage. Therefore, learners at an early stage in their acquisition of a second language are more receptive to literature than at any other time. Later, as lexical and syntactic knowledge increases other elements of literature become analysable, but it would be foolish to deny learners the right to read literature at this crucial early stage.

### 3.4.2 Reader-response theory

In the past, the intuitions of a native speaker literary critic were thought to be approachable only by advanced learners, but literary theory over the last two decades has discredited the notion that there is a correct exegesis of a text waiting to be discovered by qualified readers subservient to the text. Reader-response theory stresses that reading is a form of authorship; that the interaction between text and the reader's experience and culture is what creates the meaning of a text. Readers are able to assert an interpretation of a text on their own authority. This leads to many different poems being created by readers from the same poetic text, but to avoid this "promiscuity", Stanley Fish (1980) argues that each reading will be formed by the ideological community (Marxist, feminist etc) which the reader represents. Interpretations are therefore not authorised by the individual, but by the community. "The interpreter is freed from service to the text only to become the humble servant of his ideological group" (Scholes 1985 : 10). Once again, individual interpretation must defer to an informed elite. In rebutting this argument Fish's critics (Scholes 1985 and Widdowson 1992), state that poems are indeed created by the reader acting as author, but that it is possible to make more or less accurate reference to a text in reaching an interpretation. The teaching of poetry, Widdowson argues (1992: xii), should provide students "with ways of justifying their own judgement by making as precise reference to the text as possible". By this he means precision of reference to the text in order to support a particular interpretation, and not precision of the interpretation itself.

### 3.4.3 Linguistics of contact

The convenience and security which being a member of a community brings to the individual are axiomatic. That community may be the country, village or town where we live; it may be political or religious in character. The advantages of such communities are evident: the disadvantage is that those with different backgrounds and viewpoints are excluded.

A 1987 paper by Mary Louise Pratt challenged this idea of community, which she calls an idealisation, related to notions of "nation state" and "fraternity". She argues for a "linguistics of contact" which will study the interaction between people who do not share a common background. Speakers of English are unaware that they speak only one variety of the language until they come into contact with a speaker of another variety. Their sense of group membership and linguistic identity is derived precisely from this contact with the other. It is ironic that the sense of difference which in the past has led to the withholding of literature from other communities, itself stems from contact with those communities. "All too often we create literature out of innate, universal, human skills and then think of it as conveying the values of a particular community or culture" (Bassnett and Grundy 1993: 10). In the light of this argument the concept of accepted readings is not sustainable, and nor should students have to undergo training in literary appreciation before being accepted into the community of those who can read English literature with an English understanding. More profitable is what happens when readers with very different languages and cultures come into contact with literature. Nevertheless the practical problem of overcoming students' misgivings in the face of foreign literature needs to be tackled: they need a way into literature without the imposition of accepted readings, and this is perhaps most effectively provided through a stylistic analysis of the language of literature.

#### 4 . An example of stylistics

In this spirit I offer an analysis of Alexander Pope's style, concentrating on three excerpts from his major poems: *The Rape of the Lock* II 1-18; *Essay On Man* I 267-280; and *The Dunciad* IV 149-164. Although Pope may be considered a difficult poet, by examining the linguistic features familiar to students (phonology, syntax and lexis), I hope to show some of the stylistic techniques which Pope uses throughout his poetry, and which find parallels in the larger designs of his work.

The major phonological effect throughout Pope's verse is the rhyme. A usual (heroic) couplet has full rhymes. This expectation, which is easily assimilated by learners, is defeated twice in this passage, in lines 3-4 and 5-6. The consonance of "shone" and "alone" draws attention to Belinda's revered state. Occasionally there is rhyme between half-lines, for example in lines 13 and 14.

Bright as the Sun, her Eyes the Gazers strike,  
And, like the Sun, they shine on all alike.

This awkward, repetitive rhyme shows the same lack of discrimination and discernment as Belinda's brilliant gaze.

The predominant example of alliteration in this passage is in lines 16-18. The repetition of /f/ foregrounds keywords: faults (twice); female; fall; face; forget. In terms of the code, these words suggest woman's responsibility for the Fall, an idea which is refuted when they are replaced in context and they gain meaning from intra-textual relationships. It is the tension between the two which ironically undercuts the surface meaning.

In a study of the vocabulary of this passage, the nouns can be roughly divided into three groups. There are concrete nouns such as Sun, Thames, Youths, Cross and so on, and abstract nouns like Glories, Beams, Ease, Sweetness, and Pride. But there is an interesting cross-over between the two groups. For example, "a sprightly Mind" is disclosed but remains intangible. Similarly "Looks" are ambiguous because either Belinda's appearance or her glances at others may be meant. One meaning is concrete, the other abstract. The adjectives of the passage are all in keeping with a heroic subject: pure, grand and lively. It is the unusual collocations in which these adjectives are found which provide a mock-heroic sense, for example, the "sparkling Cross". Once again, items from the code gain meaning from their relation to other items within the text, so forming the kind of hybrid meaning mentioned in section 3.2 above.

Graphology is the study of punctuation and type-face. In eighteenth century literature, nouns are often given a capital letter to provide foregrounding and this is the case here. Pope also uses capitals on some adjectives: Etherial, Silver, Female. Further foregrounding is possible with italics: *Thames*, *Cross*, *Jews*, *Belles*. The cross and Jews are ironically juxtaposed here and the incongruity highlighted with italics. Capitalisation is a method of giving nouns the added significance of proper nouns, but if it is used too frequently its effect is lessened and stronger emphasis such as italicisation is necessary.

The passage is extremely complex syntactically, with numerous inversions of clause elements. For example:

[^(On her white breast)<sup>o</sup>(a sparkling cross)<sup>s</sup>(she)<sup>v</sup>(wore)]  
(line 7)

[<sup>Od</sup>(Favours)<sup>Oi</sup>(to none)<sup>Oi</sup>(to all)<sup>S</sup>(she)<sup>Od</sup>(smiles)<sup>P</sup>(extends)]

(line 11)

This type of complexity is finally overcome with the relatively simple structures of lines 15-18. These lines, as has already been noted, provide a solution to any thoughts of women's faults. The answer is apparently easy:

Look on her Face, and you'll forget 'em all. (line 18)

and this simplicity is also found in the grammar, so that a semantic and syntactic haven is found for the reader battered by the complexity of the preceding lines. However, this is a false sense of security because of the phonological foregrounding of female error and the Fall which I have already noted, and which lies in wait for the unwary reader.

Parallelism is a rhetorical device which recurs throughout the passage. For example, fair Nymphs and well-drest Youths; Jews and Infidels; lively Looks and sprightly Mind; quick and unfix'd; Favours and Smiles. It becomes evident that the half-line plays an important part in structuring these parallelisms and juxtapositions. The couplet when so used, is not a two-way but a four-way structure allowing for more permutations between lines. In this way Pope is able to use a series of mutual modifications of ideas. There are judgements formed by the reflection of one concept or subject on another. An overall picture may only be produced by an awareness of the relationships between things and how they affect one another. This picture can never be held entirely static, nor fully drawn.

The vocabulary of the passage from the *Essay On Man* ( I 267-280) is frequently in opposition. A quick survey of the nouns gives parts and whole; body and soul; earth and etherial frame; soul and mortal part. The nouns juxtaposed are concrete and abstract in nearly all cases. "Mortal part" means body, but it is not just elegant variation: "mortal" holds implications for the first part of the line (275) as well so we may infer the soul's immortality: another example of mutual modification. The verbs in the passage are dynamic, of organic physical actions and growth: warms; glows; blossoms; spreads; breathes, and are for the most part used intransitively. Prepositional phrases functioning as adjuncts in these clauses emphasise that God is working in and through the universe.

This brings us to lexical ambiguity. "Through" in this passage can hold two meanings. The first is "throughout" the world or universe, and the second means the world being used as a tool. This dual presence of working both on and with objects is found in the string of verbs: warms; refreshes; glows; blossoms. Both the meanings of "being warmed by" the sunshine, and being present in the sun and so warming the world, are present. Similarly, "Breathes in our soul" (line 275) can be interpreted in two ways .

a. <sup>P</sup><sub>VP</sub>(Breathes in)<sup>O</sup><sub>NP</sub>(our soul)

b. <sup>P</sup><sub>VP</sub>(Breathes)<sup>A</sup><sub>PP</sub>(in our soul)

In interpretation (a) God inhales our soul, and yet in interpretation (b) he is alive in our soul too, and so we are only the object of God's action in so far as we are a part of him.

The syntax of this passage is a mixture of the complex and the relatively simple. After "that" in line 269, follows one long relative clause containing unlinked co-ordinate clauses.

There is an apparent similarity of grammatical structures but each is different, for example:

As full, as perfect, in a hair as heart;  
 As full, as perfect, in vile Man that mourns,  
 As the rapt Seraph that adores and burns; (lines 276-278)

Lines 276 and 277 share the same first half-line, but the second halves are different. Line 276 has a comparison of hair and heart, while line 277 has “vile Man” post-modified. Line 278 dispenses with the first half-line and so loses this link with the preceding two lines, but the “rapt Seraph” is post-modified like Man, and so a link is formed here. The syntactic structure reflects the variety of God’s manifestations in the world.

All that has been mentioned so far may be included in a discussion of parallelism in this passage, because it is so evenly balanced. There is parallelism at lexical, phrasal and clausal levels. This strong structure gives the poet a freedom to range widely, gathering his subjects into a controlled framework, in order to show nature to its best advantage. This controlled style reflects man’s wish to control the universe. Man is linked with God through this grammatical order and also through the lexical ambiguities present in the passage. Pope still manages to produce control while both his grammar and lexis teem with life.

The final passage I shall deal with is *The Dunciad* IV 149-164. The division of nouns into concrete and abstract is made particularly clear because all the abstract nouns are given capital letters. These are the qualities which are seen to distinguish Man from beasts. Tangible, concrete nouns and qualities equally applicable to humans and animals have a small initial letter. In examining the verbs, two groups become apparent. The first is of teaching, instruction and guidance, that is, what we ought to do. The second group is concerned with actual behaviour: constriction, unhealthy restraint and imprisonment.

Similar tensions are produced by lexical ambiguities in the extract. For example “Words we teach alone” (line 150) in which “alone” may modify any of the other three words, so giving a number of meanings. Perhaps the most obvious is that humans are the only creatures to teach language, but there is the underlying meaning that we teach only language but nothing else. We learn the means of communication but never have anything worth saying, and so are not very far from the animals. A similar deflation of pride is present in “Reason doubtful” (line 151), and in “As Fancy opens the quick springs of Sense” (line 156). The primary meaning of “springs” is “fountainheads” but there is also the sense of traps and springes, as well as vivacity. Sense has three possible meanings: the capitalised Sense used by Augustans as a kind of talisman, a little like Right Reason; sense as in the five senses; and sense as meaning. So two possible interpretations of the line are, firstly praise of Man’s vivacity, reason and sensitivity, and secondly a warning of the traps in language. But the warning can only be seen by the careful reader as it is itself part of a linguistic pitfall. Pope also sets syntactic traps in this passage. Among the complex and difficult sentences there are a few simple statements with common subject-predicate-object or S-P-complement constructions.

The narrower is the better (line 152)  
 We never suffer it to stand too wide (line 154)  
 As Fancy opens the quick springs of sense  
 We ply the memory, we load the brain (lines 156-7)

So there are simple clauses buried in the welter of subordination and co-ordination, and clauses whose elements are in a normal SPO or SPC order. However, the simplicity of structure belies the meaning which, on examination, is suspect and possibly a lie. It is too easy to be fooled into belief by an oasis of simplicity. Yet some simple statements are truths.

We hang one jingling padlock on the mind (line 162)

The reader must examine the merits of every line before judging. We should not be tricked by simplicity, nor should we hide our own mistakes in complexity.

The rhetorical devices in the passage are dominated by metaphor which parallels the tendencies found in the verb groups. There is metaphor of territory and constriction, and of direction.

Words are Man's province (line 150)

And keep them in the pale of Words till death (line 160)

We hang one jingling padlock on the mind (line 162)

Points him two ways (line 152)

Plac'd at the door of Learning (line 153)

The idea of territory immediately involves the idea of constriction, boundaries within a pale or fence (the image of wanness and death is also present). The whole is secured by a padlock. There is a restriction here of the freedom and wide-ranging poetical imagination that has been celebrated in the previous passages. The controlling framework has grown to dominate the contents rather than show them to best advantage.

In the poetry of Pope it is shown that Man desires to reproduce the order of Nature which is created by God; of representing Nature in its best light by recognising the underlying hierarchy of an apparently anarchical mass. So the ideal relationship between Man's art, and Nature and God is complementary. Man provides the frame for nature's teeming picture. Couplets and half-lines form an essential part in demonstrating the relationships between ideas and things, showing mutual modifications, judgements and a movement towards an overall view. However, the framework must not dominate and stifle as it does in the *Dunciad* passage. Passion and genius must be allowed to flourish in a controlled but not constricting environment: to restrict these forces is to restrict the source of life and growth.

Pope may give Man a God-like power in his verse, but he is quick to warn against pride and remind us of our insecurity and vulnerability. Pope's work shatters any delusions we may have developed about our own status in the hierarchy. It holds a potential destruction of reality as we perceive it, and always questions the inaccuracies of our judgements. Our grip on truth is similarly insecure and with his syntactic and lexical ambiguities Pope plays on our desire for simple truth amongst all God's complexity.

## 5 . Conclusion

The purpose of stylistics is to examine how linguistic units communicate, and it serves as a bridge between linguistics and literary criticism. By approaching literature through its

language, second language learners are able to deepen their linguistic knowledge, learning more about the language and what can be done with it. The nature of literature as an enhancement of everyday language, together with theories of language acquisition and reading, justify the use of literature in the language classroom. The problems of traditional literary criticism and the need for learners to be accepted into the community of those qualified to read literature are avoided because the language is given priority. Learners are shown how to make precise reference to literary texts and can then derive their own interpretations, without having to defer to accepted readings.

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### Appendix

*The Rape of the Lock*. Canto II, lines 1-18.

Not with more Glories, in th' Etherial Plain,  
 The Sun first rises o'er the purpled Main,  
 Than, issuing forth, the Rival of his Beams  
 Launch'd on the Bosom of the Silver *Thames*.  
 Fair Nymphs, and well-drest Youths around her shone,           5  
 But ev'ry Eye was fix'd on her alone.  
 On her white Breast a sparkling *Cross* she wore,  
 Which *Jews* might kiss, and Infidels adore.  
 Her lively Looks a sprightly Mind disclose,  
 Quick as her Eyes, and as unfix'd as those:           10  
 Favours to none, to all she Smiles extends;  
 Oft she rejects, but never once offends.  
 Bright as the Sun, her Eyes the Gazers strike,

And, like the Sun, they shine on all alike.  
 Yet graceful Ease, and Sweetness void of Pride 15  
 Might hide her Faults, if *Belles* had Faults to hide:  
 If to her share some Female Errors fall,  
 Look on her Face, and you'll forget 'em all.

***An Essay On Man. Epistle I, lines 267-280.***

All are but parts of one stupendous whole,  
 Whose body Nature is, and God the soul;  
 That, chang'd thro' all, and yet in all the same,  
 Great in the earth, as in th' ethereal frame, 270  
 Warms in the sun, refreshes in the breeze,  
 Glows in the stars, and blossoms in the trees,  
 Lives thro' all life, extends thro' all extent,  
 Spreads undivided, operates unspent;  
 Breathes in our soul, informs our mortal part, 275  
 As full, as perfect, in a hair as heart;  
 As full, as perfect, in vile Man that mourns,  
 As the rapt Seraph that adores and burns:  
 To him no high, no low, no great, no small;  
 He fills, he bounds, connects, and equals all. 280

***The Dunciad. Book IV, lines 149-164.***

Then thus. Since Man from beast by Words is known,  
 Words are Man's province, Words we teach alone. 150  
 When Reason doubtful, like the Samian letter,  
 Points him two ways, the narrower is the better.  
 Plac'd at the door of Learning, youth to guide,  
 We never suffer it to stand too wide.  
 To ask, to guess, to know, as they commence, 155  
 As Fancy opens the quick springs of Sense,  
 We ply the Memory, we load the brain,  
 Bind rebel Wit, and double chain on chain,  
 Confine the thought, to exercise the breath;  
 And keep them in the pale of Words till death. 160  
 Whate'er the talents, or howe'er design'd,  
 We hang one jingling padlock on the mind:  
 A Poet the first day, he dips his quill;  
 And what the last? a very Poet still.