Stylistics

Stylistics is the description and analysis of the variability of linguistic forms in actual language use. The concepts of 'style' and 'stylistic variation' in language rest on the general assumption that within the language system, the same content can be encoded in more than one linguistic form. Operating at all linguistic levels (e.g. lexicology, syntax, text linguistics, and intonation), stylisticians analyze both the style of specific texts and stylistic variation across texts. These texts can be literary or nonliterary in nature. Generally speaking, style may be regarded as a choice of linguistic means; as deviation from a norm; as recurrence of linguistic forms; and as comparison.

Considering style as choice, there are a multitude of stylistic factors that lead the language user to prefer certain linguistic forms to others. These factors can be grouped into two categories: user-bound factors and factors referring to the situation where the language is being used. User-bound factors include, among others, the speaker's or writer's age; gender; idiosyncratic preferences; and regional and social background. Situation-bound stylistic factors depend on the given communication situation, such as medium (spoken vs. written); participation in discourse (monologue vs. dialogue); attitude (level of formality); and field of discourse (e.g. technical vs. nontechnical fields). With the caveat that such stylistic factors work simultaneously and influence each other, the effect of one, and only one, stylistic factor on language use provides a hypothetical one-dimensional variety. Drawing on this methodological abstraction, stylistic research has identified many correlations between specific stylistic factors and language use. For example, noun phrases tend to be more complex in written than in spoken language in many speech communities, and passive voice occurs much more frequently in technical fields of discourse than in nontechnical ones.

Style, as deviation from a norm, is a concept that is used traditionally in literary stylistics, regarding literary language as more deviant than nonliterary language use. This not only pertains to formal structures such as metrics and rhyme in poems but to unusual linguistic preferences in general, which an author's poetic license allows. Dylan Thomas's poetry, for example, is characterized by word combinations that are semantically incompatible at first sight and, thus, clearly deviate from what is perceived as normal (e.g. *a grief ago, once below a time*). What actually constitutes the 'norm' is not always explicit in literary stylistics, since this would presuppose the analysis of a large collection of nonliterary texts. However, in the case of authorship identification, statistical approaches were pursued at a relatively early stage. For example, by counting specific lexical features in the political letters written by an anonymous Junius in the 1770s and comparing them with a large collection of texts from the same period, and with samples taken from other possible contemporary authors, the Swedish linguist Ellegård could identify, in the 1960s, the most likely author of those letters.

The concept of style as recurrence of linguistic forms is closely related to a probabilistic and statistical understanding of style, which implicitly underlies the deviation-from-a-norm perspective. It had already been suggested in the 1960s that by focusing on actual language use, stylisticians cannot help describing

only characteristic tendencies that are based on implicit norms and undefined statistical experience in, say, given situations and genres. In the last resort, stylistic features remain flexible and do not follow rigid rules, since style is not a matter of grammaticality, but rather of appropriateness. What is appropriate in a given context can be deduced from the frequency of linguistic devices in this specific context. As for the analysis of frequencies, corpus linguistic methods are becoming increasingly important. With the advent of personal computers, huge storage capacities, and relevant software, it is now possible to compile very large collections of texts (corpus (singular), corpora (plural)), which represent a sample of language use in general, and thus enable exhaustive searches for all kinds of linguistic patterns within seconds. This methodology is based on the general approach of style as probability, by allowing for large-scale statistical analyses of text. For example, by using corpora, the notion of text-type—defined by co-occurrences of specific linguistic features—has been introduced to complement the extralinguistic concept of 'genre'. The linguistically defined text types contradict traditionally and nonempirically established genre distinctions to a considerable extent. In particular, many spoken and written genres resemble each other linguistically to a far greater extent in terms of text-types than previously assumed.

Style as comparison puts into perspective a central aspect of the previous approaches. That is, stylistic analysis always requires an implicit or explicit comparison of linguistic features between specific texts, or between a collection of texts and a given norm. In principle, stylistically relevant features such as style markers may convey either a local stylistic effect (e.g. an isolated technical term in everyday communication) or, in the case of recurrence or co-occurrence, a global stylistic pattern (e.g. specialized vocabulary and passive voice in scientific texts).

From the multitude of linguistic approaches to style, two linguistic schools of the twentieth century have exerted the most decisive influence on the development, terminology, and the state of the art of stylistics: the Prague School and British Contextualism.

The central dictum of Prague School linguistics, going back to the Bauhaus School of architecture, is form follows function. Firmly established since the 1920s, some of this dictum's most important proponents are Lubomír Doležel, Bohuslav Havránek, Roman Jakobson, and Jan Mukařovský. These linguists have paid particular attention to situation-bound stylistic variation. A standard language is supposed to have a communicative and an esthetic function that result in two different 'functional dialects': prosaic language and poetic language. More specific functional dialects may, of course, be identified; for example, the scientific dialect as a subclass of prosaic language, which is characterized by what is called the 'intellectualization of language'—lexicon, syntax, and reference conform to the overall communicative function that requires exact and abstract statements.

A very important notion is the distinction between 'automatization' and 'foregrounding' in language. Automatization refers to the common use of linguistic devices which does not attract particular attention by the language decoder, for example, the use of discourse markers (e.g. *well*, *you know*, *sort of*, *kind of*) in spontaneous spoken conversations. Automatization thus correlates with the usual background pattern, or the norm, in language use—it encompasses those forms and structures that competent language users expect to be used in a given context of situation. Foregrounded linguistic devices, on the other hand, are usually not expected to be used in a specific context and are thus considered conspicuous—they catch the language decoder's attention (e.g. the use of old-fashioned and/or very formal words such as *epicure*, *improvident*, and *whither* in spontaneous spoken conversations). Foregrounding thus captures deviations from the norm. It is obvious that what is considered as automatized and foregrounded language use depends on the communication situation at hand. In technical fields of discourse, for instance, specialized vocabulary items tend to be automatized (e.g. *lambda marker* in molecular biology), but in everyday communication become foregrounded devices.

A different, although conceptually similar, tradition of linguistic stylistics was established by British linguists in the 1930s and came to be called British Contextualism. The most important proponents of British Contextualism include John Rupert Firth, M.A.K. Halliday, and John Sinclair. Their work is characterized by a clear focus, firstly, on the social context in which language is used and, secondly, on the in-depth observation of natural language use. From the point of view of British Contextualists, linguists need to describe authentic language use in context and should not confine themselves to invented and isolated sentences. Additionally, linguistics is not considered as an intuition-based study of abstract systems of form as, for example, in the merely formal description of autonomous syntactic rules (as in Chomsky's approach to language), but as the observation-based and empirical analysis of meaning encoded by form. This approach allows for insights into the immense variation within language. It is a fact that depending on the context of situation, all speakers use different 'registers' (i.e. different styles of language, depending on the topic, the addressee, and the medium in a given context of use). Note that there is, of course, a clear

correspondence between the concept of register and the Prague School's notion of functional dialect. Although largely abandoned by mainstream linguists in the 1960s and 1970s due to the prevailing Chomskyan school of thought, it had already been suggested by Firth in the 1950s that large collections of text were a prerequisite for an empirical approach to stylistic variation. Thus, it does not come as a tremendous surprise that, among others, Sinclair set out to develop computerized corpora that could be used as empirical databases.

With corpus linguistics now a standard methodology, stylistic analyses have reached an unprecedented degree of explanatory adequacy and empirical accuracy. For example, stylistic features that are beyond most linguists' scope of intuition, such as the nonstandard use of question tags in English-speaking teenagers' talk, are now feasible in quantitative terms. More importantly, there is no longer a bias toward foregrounded phenomena that tend to catch the linguist's attention. A computer, in contrast, does not distinguish between conspicuous and common phenomena and provides an exhaustive array of all kinds of patterns, depending solely on the search query. Thus, the fuzzy concept of 'norm' is about to be put on an empirical footing since the accessible corpus norm represents the norm of a language as a whole.

Stylistics is a linguistic branch that is immediately relevant to foreign language teaching. This applies to both linguistic and literary stylistics. Language learners must know which linguistic devices are preferred by native speakers in specific contexts. Without such a linguostylistic competence, communication errors may be made in interacting with native speakers, such as using highly formal words in informal settings. Also, learners must have command of text-typological knowledge, which is important, for example, in writing essays. As for literary texts, language learners should acquire a firm understanding of those levels of description where stylistic variation may occur (e.g. by analyzing Hemingway's syntactic simplicity and, moreover, its function).

It should be noted that a specific style is sometimes ascribed to a language in its entirety. Although the underlying norms remain largely unspecified, general tendencies of stylistic preference differ across languages. This is particularly important for translators, but also for language learners. It is, for instance, common for German students of English to transfer the German style of academic writing, which is characterized by heavy noun phrases, to their English essays.

As with any other linguistic branch, stylistics is very much a work in progress. This is because the object of inquiry constantly grows, evolving new and specialized fields of discourse (e.g. genetic engineering, computer sciences). Furthermore, new aspects of stylistic variation come into existence, such as e-mails, a now widely used genre that seems to blur the traditional distinction between spoken and written language. As for empirical approaches to style, new corpora make it possible to address questions of style not possible before. Also, recent theoretical developments will no doubt widen the scope of stylistics. Drawing on British contextualists' distinction between language substance (that is, sound waves in the phonic medium and printed paper in the graphic medium) and language form (that is, anything that can be transferred from one medium into the other), it has been suggested that stylistic analyses should clearly distinguish between medium-dependent and medium-independent stylistic variation. Intonation, for example, is bound to the phonic medium and shows stylistic variation that cannot be mapped onto punctuation in a straightforward and monocausal way. With regard to the graphic substance, English orthography, albeit highly standardized, is also affected by stylistic variation, as deliberate misspellings in the language of advertising and popular culture (e.g. *2* for *to*/*two*/*too*, *lynx* for *links*) reveal. On the other hand, words and syntax are linguistic devices that, in principle, are subject to transfer between media, although there are clear medium-dependent preferences of lexical and syntactic choice that need to be investigated further.

The objective and unbiased approach to stylistic variation in authentic language use is a cornerstone of modern descriptive linguistics. Unlike traditional grammar, it clearly rejects the normative prescription of one specific style.

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See also **Firth, John Rupert; Halliday, M.A.K. (Michael Alexander Kirkwood)**

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