

Contextualist Stylistics and Orality

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Abstract. At the initial stage of the emergence of stylistics as a branch of literary critical study, it was mainly concerned with the study of literary text without reference to context and other related factors affecting a text. Textualist stylistics and its predecessor, rhetoric assume that style, especially literary style, involves a deliberate shift of language away from its pragmatic, functional role disclosing meaning and towards a zone of playful self-reference. Barthes contends that this notion of style as an arbitrary self-referring system is a condition of all types of discourse. Again, Levi-Straus argues that the various types of social, familial, sexual, political and ritualistic conventions constitute each human society and / or ethnic group. A literary text, therefore, is a product of a dynamic interaction of society and all its prevailing cultural aspects including oral tradition. Further folk and oral culture is indeed, not only a repertoire of linguistic forms but also a whole world vision, once inextricably linked with what is supposed to high, learned, literate culture. In the present study we propose to trace the relation between written literary text and orality and this will be dealt with in relation to Contextualist stylistics as developed by Barthes.

Keywords : Stylistics; semiotics; orality; textualist stylistics; contextualist stylistics; folk literature.

Introduction

At the initial stage of the emergence of stylistics as a branch of literary critical study, it was mainly concerned with the study of literary text without reference to context and other related factors affecting a text. Textualist stylistics and its predecessor, rhetoric assume that style, especially literary style, involves a deliberate shift of language away from its pragmatic, functional role disclosing meaning and towards a zone of playful self-reference. Barthes contends that this notion of style as an arbitrary self-referring system is a condition of all types of discourse. Again, Levi-Straus argues that the various types of social, familial, sexual, political and ritualistic conventions constitute each human society and / or ethnic group. A literary text, therefore, is a product of a dynamic interaction of society and all its prevailing cultural aspects including oral tradition. Further folk and oral culture is indeed, not only a repertoire of linguistic forms but also a whole world vision, once inextricably linked with what is supposed to be high, learned, literate culture. In the present study we propose to trace the relation between written literary text and orality and

this will be dealt with in relation to Contextualist stylistics as developed by Barthes and Fish.

Style and Stylistics

What does 'style' mean? In general terms, *style* refers to the way of doing or executing things. The word 'style' in the linguistic world means the way in which language is used in 'a given context, by a given person, for a given purpose and so on'. The speaker or writer selects a set of linguistic expressions with a view to conveying a particular idea in a given context. It is evident that style is expected to vary according to the source of language use (i.e., speaker/writer), the context, mode and purpose of its use. However, in certain discourse (e.g., legal document, medical report etc.) the style does not vary. It can thus be claimed that it is the appropriate selection of elements from the total linguistic repertoire which constitutes style.

So far as literary style is concerned, the style of writing depends on the genre, theme, and the writer's linguistic and communicative competence. In other words, style in a literary text refers to the linguistic habits of a writer (e.g., style of Bacon, Hardy or Lawrence) or the language as used in a particular genre, period or school of writing etc. Thus we find that there are various kinds of literary style which literary critics attempt to identify, examine and evaluate. According to Leech, style is 'a relational term'. When we talk about the style of a particular text, we deal with the characteristics of language used in that text and these are correlated with the extra-linguistic elements such as idea, values, perspectives, aesthetics, etc. which linguistics helps to analyse in terms of the characteristics of language use.

The study of style, here literary style, is made in literary criticism. Stylistics, generally considered to be the modern version of ancient '*Rhetoric*', also studies the style of a literary text. But this study is carried out with the help of knowledge of linguistics. Stylistics is a branch of (applied) linguistics which seeks to appreciate a literary text through the scientific rigorous study and understanding of the style as evidenced in the discourse or text. In this context it seems necessary to quote the following comment of Leo Spitzer:

I would maintain that to formulate observation by means of words is not to cause the artistic beauty evaporate in vain intellectualities, rather it makes for a widening and deepening of the aesthetic taste. It is only a frivolous love that cannot survive intellectual definition, great love prospers with understanding. (Spitzer 56)

Spitzer further argued that the task of a linguistic-cum-literary explanation i.e., the stylistic analysis proceeds by means of a movement to and from the linguistic details

to the literary centre of the writer's art. Linguistic observation-cum-analysis stimulates and modifies literary insight and then, literary insight, in turn, stimulates further linguistic observation-cum-analysis. Such early attempt, as discussed in the previous unit, is known as literary stylistics which is concerned more with literary aspects of a text or discourse. The tussle between the linguist and literary critic thus gets reduced and from the 1970s onwards we have had more and more linguists turning to literature to study the rich and individualistic ways in which language is used. In order to make stylistics more objective as well as scientific linguists like Fowler, Jakobson etc., observe and analyse the literary texts with the linguistic insight and make an objective stylistic description of those. The venture is known as 'linguistic stylistics' which provides the technical and theoretical base for the objective study of style. Out of the diversity of linguistic frameworks and systems, one concrete path that emerges is 'a tendency to explore for pattern and system below the surface form of language, to search for principles of meaning and language use which activate and control the code... If a text is regarded in objective simplicity as a sequence of symbols on paper, then the modern linguist's scrutiny is not just a matter of looking at the text, but of looking through the text to its significance.

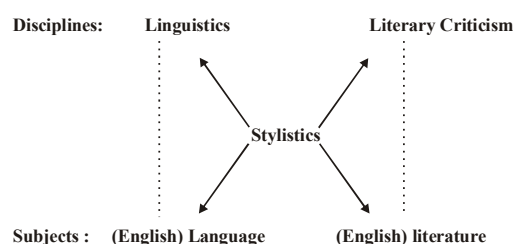
Stylistics is generally contextualized and discourse-based (Verdonk, 2002; Simpson, 2004), focusing on issues of choices of style, register, genre, culture and identities in varying contexts. Let us now see what Turner (1973) states in his book *Stylistics* :

Linguistics is the science of describing language and showing how it works; stylistics is the part of linguistics which concentrates on variation in the use of language, often, but not exclusively, with special attention to the most conscious and complex uses of language in literature. 'Stylistics' is not a 'stylish' word, but the two are well connected. The French write of 'la stylistique', the German discuss 'die Stylistik'. 'Stylistics' means the study of style, with a suggestion, from the form of the word, of a scientific or at least a methodical study. (Turner 79)

Literary writing is 'a special, careful, elaborated, shuffled, pruned and tidied form of language, very different from the everyday, spontaneous, precarious adventures of speech' which make up the most of the world's linguistic activity and are in that sense 'normal language'. Linguistics, as we know, attempts to describe the language components and their variations as used by the native speakers. Stylistics deals with how these linguistic components (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics) and their variations have been utilised by the literary artists. According to Turner (1973), a stylistician needs to begin with a theory of the linguistic scheme and relate it to particular speeches and writings, even if he is ultimately justified as

the linguist not of our abstract competence in language but of our particular performances. He further states that the superimposition of literary scheme on the scheme of ordinary language creates a very interesting stylistic study because the two schemes are consciously played off one against the other but the 'existence of multiple schemes is not in itself special to literary language'.

By stylistics Widdowson (1988) means "the study of literary discourse from a linguistic orientation". It is stylistics which involves both literary criticism and linguistics, as its morphological make-up suggests: the 'style' component relating it to the former and the 'istics' component to the latter. The purpose of stylistic analysis, Widdowson (1974: 202) argues, 'is to investigate how the resources of language code are put to use in the production of actual messages'. It is a pattern of use in given texts. Style is not studied for its own sake. It is carried with a view to exploring some aspect of meaning of a given text and considering how the style brings out its meaning. (Literary) Stylistics thus attempts to relate the critic's concern about aesthetic appreciation with the linguist's concern regarding the linguistic description in a text. In order to show the relationship between linguistics and literary criticism Widdowson (1988) has projected a simple diagram as given below:



This simple diagram, as suggested by Widdowson, seeks to explore the fact that stylistics is neither a discipline nor a subject in its own right, but a means of relating disciplines and subjects. As the above diagram indicates, this relationship is not only between discipline and discipline, subject and subject but also between subject and discipline and the reverse. In other words, stylistics can serve as a means whereby language and literature as subjects can by process of gradual approximation move towards both linguistics and literary criticism.

Contextualist Stylistics

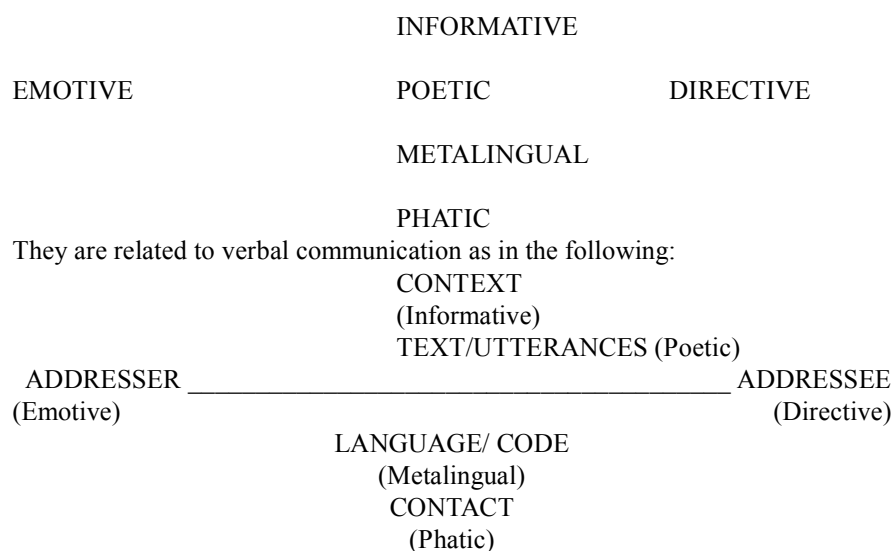
Stylistics as a discipline can tell us how to explore and name the constituent parts of a literary text and enable us to document their operations with the help of terminology and methodology drawn from the linguistic analyses of language in real world. Language functions in a human society, not in vacuum and literature which is an outcome of the well use of language originates from the dynamic

interactions of constituents or elements contributing to the growth of a particular society and its culture. Literary text as well as its style is formed and influenced by its context, signification system inside and outside the linguistic community, prevailing socio-cultural forces, etc. Hence a comprehensive stylistic appreciation or analysis of a text which can be branded as Contextualist Stylistics in formal term is dependent on all these along with the competence and the disposition of the reader.

Prague School members including Mukarovsky, Jacobson, etc., as we know, have made a significant contribution to the stylistics (of poetry) in relation to the application of this disciplinary rigour to the relation between text and non-literary world of language and events. Jacobson writes :

Not only the message (of poetry) but also its addresser and addressee become ambiguous- -the supremacy of the poetic function over the referential function does not obliterate the message but makes it ambiguous. The double sensed message finds correspondence in a split addresser, in a split addressee as well as in a split reference. (Jacobson 1988:50)

Mukarovsky opines that a work of art is a system of (linguistic) signs and a sign in contrast to other signs does not lay on some final unambiguous relationship with reality. Jacobson has proposed a functional model of six parameters and six functions to explain the act of communication. These six functions are:



The above diagram clearly substantiates the views of Jacobson that the physical and contextual factors affect the actual structure and meaning of the language in a particular act of communication, be it literary or non-literary. According to Saussure, the structure of the language affects and influences our perception of reality around us and the things and the ideas that we encounter distinguished and identified by the differences and relationship between the words denoting and describing those. Adapting this thesis, Jacobson shows how 'the structure of poetic language can distort and restructure the refractory indexes of ordinary language' (Bradford 1997: 73). Barthes has taken both these theses and extended these further in his seminal books *Elements of Semiology* (1964) and *Systeme de la Mode* (1967) and has proposed, to put in the words of Bradford :

We inhabit a network of different sign systems, all of which are capable of creating different levels of interaction between representation and perceived reality, which while they themselves share fundamental, interchangeable systems of signification, or grammars. (1997 : 73)

In order to drive home this idea Barthes attempts a comparison between the codes of signification involving fashion (clothes) and literature: different items of clothing are integrally associated with the different parts of human physique—mainly head, body, hand, legs and feet. Similarly, the syntagmatic chain of the sentence evolves in a particular situation of communication. And 'the choices made at each stage in dressing—shirt or pullover, hat or hood, shoes or trainers—are comparable to the selective possibilities offered by each paradigmatic class of nouns, connectives or adjectives'. (73) In a literary text the words, phrases and sentence structures syntagmatically and paradigmatically selected and used by the writer with the help of his/her linguistic competence and original conception of the world, argues Barthes, interact with the complex semiological processes of signification in the context on which it is based, in which it is composed, and in which it is read/received. It is the convention which plays a crucial role in both literature and dressing. Barthes argues:

Fashion thus becomes an exemplary form of the act of signification and in this way unites with the essence of literature, which is to make one read the signifying of things rather than their meaning. (*Image-Music-Text* 1967: 287)

With the help of this comparison of fashion with literature, Barthes actually discards the Textualist stylistics which looks at literary style as 'a deliberate shift of language away from its pragmatic functional role of disclosing meaning and towards a zone

of playful self-reference' (Bradford 1997: 74) and concentrates on the interpretation of a literary text and its style on the basis of the elements from non-literary discourse.

Barthes's strategy or venture in using a variety of signs can also be traced in the work of Claude Levi Strauss, an anthropologist turned linguist, who argues:

Both language and culture are built of oppositions, correlations and logical relations...This is why language can be treated as a conceptual model for other aspects of culture. (*Structural Anthropology* 1963 : 69)

It is thus evident that in Levi Strauss' scheme various types of social, familial, sexual, political and ritualistic conventions which interact in an atmosphere of opposition and distinction constitute each human society ethnic group. In his *Writing Degree Zero* (1968) Barthes assimilates these ideas and concepts relating to language and its using system and signification and puts forward the following salient points:

- Language is an historical phenomenon. It is at any point imbued with the habits and conventions and indeed the ideology of its period.
- The act of creating the text (which Barthes calls 'third category of writing' in French *écriture*) negotiates the interface between style and language.
- Writing is 'the relationship between creation and society'.
- Literary language is transformed by its social finality.
- Language or grammar of the language 'constructs a semiotic flow—a flow of meaning—that is analogous to the flow of events that constitutes human experience' (Halliday 1999: 6)
- Literary text is the 'form considered as human intention and thus linked to the great crises of history'.
- Style is historically indeterminate.
- Style develops through time in its acquisition of new modes and devices.

Text is an outcome of interaction and interplay of multiple stylistic levels, registers, and frames of references which, as Barthes in his 'Death of the Author' (1968) argues, are focused on 'the reader, not as was hitherto said, the author'. Thus a reader or interpreter of literary text needs to possess 'literary competence', the term coined by Fish (1980) in imitation of Chomskyan term 'linguistic competence'. Fish, therefore, states:

Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their

intentions. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around. (Fish 1980 : 171)

The works of Saussure, Jacobson, Barthes, Fish and others have thus contributed to the emergence of Contextualist stylistics which centres round the idea that the literary or poetic discourses involve not only linguistic devices and registers and style but also the complex network of experience shaped by the language and non-linguistic factors surrounding homo sapiens.

Contextualist Stylistics and Orality

In the previous section we have talked about the different aspects of contextualist stylistics in relation to analysis and interpretation of a literary text. In the present we shall attempt to explore the nature of orality and the importance of contextualist stylistics in the appreciation of orality and also orality in literary text.

Orality or oral literature or folk literature occupies a unique and major share of rich heritage of different communities across the world. Though in the so-called modern world orality has been identified with illiteracy, i.e., sheer backwardness, it can be easily traced that oral literature of a particular linguistic community evolves out of the dynamic interaction of sign system, grammar, subtle philosophy of life, conventions, customs and rituals, etc., contributing to semiological representation of the deep ideas built in. Hence Nemade (2011) in his lecture on 'Speech: Language: Writing' argues:

Speech, with all the supra-segmentals and the whole range of accompanying extralinguistic and paralinguistic features, gives more faithful reconstruction of reality within the parameters of linguistic expression in the oral literature, whereas writing conveys a different type of consciousness separating the known, viz. language from knower, viz. the self. Orality is anchored in genetics and human biology and thus remains closer to cognition at least to some extent. (Nemade 2009 : 70)

The oral narratives in general inculcate ethos and disseminate knowledge among its subscribers and facilitate the process of self-identification for the members of the community and construct a collective identity. Hence orality which is developed

and shared by all members of the linguistic community exploits the ‘semogenic power’ of language coupled with human experience and understanding born out of man’s collision with the surrounding events and elements. Nemade, therefore, states:

Orality emphasised the primeval sweetness of literature being everybody’s possession. — One feels to be in contact with a truly universal soul in the oral culture of humanity, be it the listening or reading of the Arabian Nights or of German folk tales, the native spirit is gloriously reflected in the oral literature of the world along with their provincial manners, geographical details and dialectal features of language and they have a high universal appeal for those very reasons. (71)

Hence folk or oral culture is indeed, not only a repertoire of forms (language patterns, topoi, genres), it is also a whole world vision, once inextricably linked with what is supposed to be high, learned, literate culture, as shown by great litterateur Tagore. It is evident that oral literatures in isolation and those used in parts in written literary texts can best be captured / appreciated with the help of insights drawn from contextualist stylistics.

Oral tradition has been an integral part of Urdu literature virtually from its birth. Its influence and popularity can be traced in the works of Amir Khusro (1254-1324), the original poet of the people. His dohas, sukanas, unmilbejor, geet, paheli, dhakoslas, etc., show a remarkable linguistic and cultural synthesis and a perfect assimilation of sign and meaning and of beliefs, conventions and linguistic systems operating in the language. Similar was the case with the great Bhakti poets who relied solely on the folk traditions to convey larger philosophical truths to the lay people. The sakhis, dohas, horis, jhoolnas, ulatbansi, manglas and dharamasas of Kabir convey the spirit of the times and the richness of local culture, rich sign system operating in that culture with the sense of pluralism and mysticism.

In India the legends and myths of *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* are found to have taken different shapes and representations mainly in the oral tradition and these variations are basically rooted to the local culture, habits, conventions, approaches to life, etc. affecting the semiological representation of objects in mind and language. This is because the singers, composers, and actors of these oral renderings try to connect the concerns and aspirations of various audiences. Richman (2011) has studied in detail the several oral renderings of Ramkatha and has shown that a set of women’s songs relating to Ramkatha ‘connect the story to local cuisine, household chores, and domestic concerns’ and a set of dance-dramas ‘include slots for improvisation by artists, and some puppet plays and oral discourse

that provide extemporaneous exegesis of selected incidents in Ramakatha'. Richman opines that the topical and local enter these oral texts and make each of them unique in terms of semiotic representation shaped and reshaped by the related society and culture. These texts are the various versions with variations that exhibit the man-woman relationship within and outside the family and other related issues prevalent in the cultural and societal fabrics traced in that particular zone/society.

Similar conclusion can be drawn from the analysis of other oral versions of *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* made by Patua singers of Bengal. The Bengali culture, customs and food habits are found in the portrayal of characters, the familial and societal relationships, likes and dislikes, etc. For instance, Sita and Draupadi, the two legendary women characters in two epics, are portrayed as typical Bengali Hindu housewives wearing saris, conch bracelets, lock braided.

Conclusion

The present paper is, as stated earlier, an initiation in the direction of looking at the various rich oral literary texts from the perspective of contextualist stylistics. Such venture, it is hoped, will unfold the several shades of meaning and implication inherent in the literature of the folk close to earth.

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