May 16, 1988

Generative Syntax and Stylistics

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Fowler (1981) defines stylistics as “the application of theoretical ideas and analytic techniques drawn from linguistics to the study of literary texts” (p. 11). While stylisticians have, with mixed success, applied linguistic theories of phonology, semantics, and pragmatics to literary texts, by far the most stimulating and insightful tool for stylistic analysis to emerge from linguistic theory has been Chomsky's (1957, 1965) model of generative syntax. The system of transformational rules developed by Chomsky has provided stylisticians with new ways to approach aspects of literary texts which the old phrase-structure rules had failed to account for, such as the apparent duality of form and content (suggesting style as choice) and the concept of ungrammaticalness (suggesting style as deviance). This article reviews some of the work of stylisticians concerned with the theory and applications of generative syntax, and also some of the critiques of generative stylistics which have bearing on the future relationship of linguistics and literary criticism.

Ohmann (1964) was one of the first stylisticians to formulate a stylistic theory based on Chomsky's distinction between the deep structure and surface structure of the sentence. An important feature of Chomsky's system is that it accounts for the synonymy of sentences with different surface structures by showing how they are derived through different transformations from the same deep structure. Ohmann concludes that “the different possibilities of expansion in the grammar . . . offer an analogue to the choices open to the writer” (p. 427). In Ohmann's formulation, expression or form is analogous to surface structure and content is analogous to deep structure, and “style is in part a
characteristic way of deploying the transformational apparatus of a language . . .” (p. 431). Ohmann then proceeds to analyze passages by authors such as Faulkner and Hemingway to demonstrate how their individual styles are characterized by the syntactic transformations they choose, or choose not, to deploy in their writing. This sort of stylistic analysis is obviously of more descriptive than interpretive value. But in a later essay Ohmann (1966) goes so far as to state that “syntactic preferences correlate with habits of meaning (p. 154)—a fallacy for which he and other early stylisticians have been harshly criticized, as I shall discuss below.

Epstein (1975) confronts the problem of the duality of form and content by demonstrating that in some texts the relationship of surface structure to deep structure is arbitrary, while in other texts surface structure is consciously selected and arranged to mime deep structure. “The word mimesis,” he writes, “would here be reserved for the presence of analogous schemata in the lexical level and one or both of the lower levels of syntax or phonology (or graphemics)” (p. 48). He then suggests that different grades of mimesis are assigned different values by our culture, and that “mimetic phonological and syntactic forms . . . provide a metaphor for lexis in the more highly valued forms” (p. 50). For example, Pope's line from An Essay on Criticism—“And ten low Words oft creep in one dull Line” (l. 347)—would receive a high grade of value because the mimesis is effected by a combination of syntactic and phonological structures. Epstein's theory of value is thus formalized by providing a taxonomy of different types of mimesis and characterizing the varieties by means of stylistic analysis.

Another concern of stylisticians which has received illumination from Chomsky's theory of syntax is the problem of ungrammaticalness. The problem was most clearly articulated by Mukarovsky (1964): “The violation of the norm of the standard, its systematic violation, is what
makes possible the poetic utilization of language; without this possibility there would be no poetry” (p. 19). The key phrase here is “its systematic violation,” for the implication is that even though poetic language violates the rules of the standard language, these violations are nevertheless systematic and therefore rule-governed. Thus, some early stylisticians saw their task as simply to list the deviant structures in a text and to state the transformational rules which would generate these structures, thereby constructing a “grammar of a text.” “Behind the idea of constructing what is in effect a grammar for the poem,” says Thorne (1970), “lies the idea that what the poet has done is to create a new language (or dialect) and that the task that faces the reader is in some ways like that of learning a new language (or dialect)” (p. 194). Again, like Ohmann's technique, this technique, when applied alone, is evidently limited to descriptive applications; but, like Ohmann, Thorne insists on attributing interpretive value to the technique when he says, “The whole point of constructing a grammar which would generate these [deviant] constructions is that it provides a way of stating clearly the interpretation that one finds for them” (pp. 194-195). As we shall see, this hypothesis is subject to criticism for presuming that a relationship exists between the description of the grammar and the interpretation of the text.

In conjunction with description of deviant language, later stylisticians have found it productive to consider the function of deviant language in a given text, to which Mukarovsky (1964) has provided a helpful clue: “The function of poetic language consists in the maximum foregrounding of the utterance” (p. 21). The concept of foregrounding suggests to Freeman (1975) that “a poet often bends the laws of ordinary language where his design most asks us to notice” (p. 21). In effect, Freeman reverses Thorne's approach to deviant language: rather than describing the grammar of a text to support a preconceived interpretation, Freeman proposes that “the discovery
of poetic design begins with the discovery of linguistic strategy” (p. 20). By analyzing the syntactic structures of three poems by Dylan Thomas, Freeman demonstrates how the poet’s deployment of particular transformations functions not merely as a mannerism of style, but as a syntactic strategy to direct the reader to “the centre of a poem’s artistic design” (p. 30).

An important aspect of Freeman’s article is that his analysis is based on the effect of a poet’s syntactic strategy on a reader. Also, Epstein’s grades of mimesis are based on values assigned by the culture in this particular period. This broadening of scope is in part a response to a critique of stylistics by Fish (1973) where he calls for “an ‘affective’ stylistics, in which the focus of attention is shifted from the spatial context of a page and its observable regularities to the temporal content of a mind and its experiences” (p. 144). Fish points to “a serious defect in the procedures of stylistics, the absence of any constraint on the way in which one moves from description to interpretation, with the result that any interpretation one puts forward is arbitrary” (p. 113). He attacks Ohmann and Thorne for doing “what Noam Chomsky so pointedly refrains from doing, assign a semantic value to the devices of his descriptive mechanism, so that rather than being neutral between the processes of production and reception, they are made directly to reflect them” (p. 116). But Fish does not suggest that syntactic structures are meaningless; rather, he suggests they acquire meaning “by virtue of their position in a structure of experience” (p. 143). “In the kind of stylistics I propose,” he says, “interpreative acts are what is being described . . .” (p. 148); and “formal linguistic characterizations can help, if . . . one views their content as potential cues for the performing acts” (p. 151).

Fish’s article has had an enormous impact on the methodology of stylistic analysis. Aside from the attitude of cautious restraint with which stylisticians have since approached aspects of
syntax in literary texts (as is evident in the work of Epstein and Freeman discussed above), there has been a trend among stylisticians to abandon the purely formalistic analysis of literary texts first advocated by the New Critics, and instead to embrace a more sociolinguistic approach in order to account for the reader's response to literature. “The New Stylistics” proposed by Fowler (1975), for instance, attempts “to show how the linear organization of syntax directs the reading process in the retrieval of meaning” (p.10). Thus, inadvertently, the fledgling discipline of generative stylistics may have initiated a movement to revolutionize the theoretical approach to literary criticism.

Bibliography


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