

## Introduction: Stylistics and Contemporary Fiction

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Stylistics is the study of language patterns in texts and of the meaningful relationship between linguistic choice and literary interpretation. Stylisticians apply the most up to date theories from linguistics and language study to analyse both the production and interpretation of texts and aim to offer precise, robust and non-impressionistic accounts of literary reading. The discipline's roots can be traced right back to classical studies of rhetoric and, in the twentieth century, to traditions and practices developed in both Europe (e.g., Formalism, Structuralism) and the United States (e.g., New Criticism) all of which made the language of the text being analysed a central consideration.

Over time, stylisticians have continued to draw on the latest insights from linguistics, adopting those theories, methods and frameworks which have proved to have the most currency and, above all, are inherently practical. In turn, a set a set of working practices and principles for the field has been identified.

First, stylistics takes a distinctive methodological stance in that it aims to adhere to what Paul Simpson<sup>1</sup> calls the “3Rs”: *rigorous* in terms of drawing on an established set of concepts and tools; *retrievable* in that analyses are set out in an organised and transparent manner using commonly shared terminology not idiosyncratic expression; and *replicable* in that other researchers can test the same methods on the same text to understand how an interpretation was arrived at, or more uses those methods broadly on other texts.

Second, stylisticians have taken a pragmatic stance when it comes to choosing the most appropriate tools for analysis and viewed “eclecticism”<sup>2</sup> as a positive attribute. The focus for

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<sup>1</sup> Simpson, *Stylistics: A Resource Book for Students*, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Stockwell and Whiteley, “Introduction,” 2.

stylisticians always depends on which theories and methods are most suitable for the task at hand and this flexibility is reflected in the sheer range of theories and tools that researchers have drawn on. One of the most influential recent advances in the field has come from the field of cognitive science and specifically cognitive linguistics, which offers radical ways of reconceptualising the relationship between mind, body, language and meaning. Cognitive approaches have enabled stylisticians both to explore familiar ideas from literary studies through new lenses and to discuss important (but what previously seemed intangible) concepts related to literary reading such as imagination, immersion, ethics, and personal response in systematic and principled ways. This emergence of cognitive poetics<sup>3</sup> has been one of the most important and exciting avenues for stylistics over the last twenty years.

Third, stylistics is sensitive to context. Moving from analyses that focused on smaller units of language, contemporary stylistics now has the tools to treat context seriously both by integrating notions of culture or history that appear in traditional literary scholarship, and by examining the contexts of reception through the empirical study of readers. In this respect stylistics aims to treat the reader as more than simply a theoretical concept and has established a tradition of examining civilian reader responses as well as those of professional academic critics in order to generate insights into how texts are interpreted and discussed. These studies are fully contextualised in that they draw attention to the range of situations in which interpretations are shared and meanings negotiated, for example in online review sites, reading groups and educational settings<sup>4</sup>. These responses can be analysed alongside textual features to gain greater insight into how language positions readers to respond in certain ways, to verify theoretical accounts of meaning, and to examine how interpretative effects are articulated in specific social contexts.

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<sup>3</sup> Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction*.

<sup>4</sup> For more discussion, see Whiteley and Canning, "Reader Response Research in Stylistics."

The articles in this special issue use concepts, methods and approaches in modern stylistics to examine contemporary fiction, a diverse genre that reinforces, disrupts and refreshes readers' understanding of character, structure and style, bringing together a number of research strands to investigate distinctive style choices and the effects of those choices on readers. Covering a range of topics that represent some of the current trends in contemporary stylistic research such as clue-burying and misdirection, character enactors and the modelling of fictional minds, this special issue focuses on different text genres such as crime fiction, speculative fiction, autofiction and interconnected short stories. Overall, the contributors examine and outline how stylistic frameworks can effectively account for how we read, respond to and experience contemporary fiction.

Jessica Norledge opens the special issue with an analysis of the dystopian text *Hollow Kingdom* by Kira Jane Buxton. For Norledge, dystopia is "inherently concerned with human experience, presenting nightmarish extrapolations that revolve around such salient topics as political deviance, tyranny, systematic discrimination, genocide or war". In *Hollow Kingdom*, the human population has been subjected to an unnamed disease which has allowed animals to take over. To capture the nonhuman experience of this new world, the text is narrated through a number of nonhuman narrators. In her cognitive stylistic analysis, Norledge examines two of the recurring narrative voices in the novel, drawing together existing narratological approaches to the representation of nonhuman experiences to explore how these two narrators display "various permutations of animal consciousness presentation", marked by expressive and creative stylistic choices. These permutations affect how readers map the human-to-animal qualities of specific narrators and how they construe the wider networking of the *umwelt* across the novel. Norledge reflects on the implications these choices have for a reader's ability to empathetically engage with and successfully mind-model the characters contribute to the successful creation of worlds in dystopian fiction.

Christiana Gregoriou's article outlines a diachronic study of crime fiction writing and re-writing. Misdirection and clue burying are noted to be particular stylistic strategies employed in the creation of a successful "whodunit". Red herrings, for example, are identified as an effective means of misdirection as their irrelevance is revealed retrospectively at the point of (re)solution and remain as potentially misleading clues until confirmed otherwise. With reference to early drafts and notes of crime writer Peter Robinson's popular Inspector Banks novels, Gregoriou examines how Robinson re-wrote and redrafted his novels to include a higher number of clues. These clues include the creation of false suspicion surrounding particular (innocent) characters through the manipulation of narrator focalisation, sympathy alignment and the representation of (un)reliability. Gregoriou's analysis demonstrates how Robinson plays with schematic expectations and cultural character stereotypes, as well as employing other strategies such as repetition, under-specification and "giving items false significance", which work together to obfuscate the real identity of the characters instrumental in the crime. Gregoriou concludes with a reflection on reader expectations of the crime fiction genre, which can be influenced by individual experiences and schemata as well as knowledge and awareness of the author's work, and how knowledge of these stylistic mechanisms may provide helpful context for writing crime fiction.

A different type of text is under consideration in Chloe Harrison and Marcello Giovanelli's account of *Olive Kitteridge*, which explores the role of characterisation within the short story cycle format. The eponymous character in *Olive Kitteridge* is responsible for the interconnections and cohesion across the segmented narratives across the text, which falls somewhere between a "novel in stories" and a short story collection. Readers of this text are shown to emotionally respond to Olive's character: she is a rounded and multi-faceted character who takes on a life of her own beyond the pages of the book. Harrison and Giovanelli contextualise stylistic approaches to characterisation, and consider how processes of mind-

modelling and text-external templates help readers to build up richer conceptualisations of characters in fiction. Their analysis traces Olive's development through the text, from how she is perceived externally by other characters through to the direct presentation of her mind as afforded through closer focalisation and unmediated mind-casting. They further argue that these processes of mind-modelling and mind-casting function at the local and macro levels of the text, spanning the self-contained narratives that constitute the story cycle to create a reading experience that is both immersive and resonant.

The next two articles consider texts which problematise categorisations of genre and form. First, Andrea Macrae's article explores the metafiction text *Multiple Choice* by Alejandro Zambra. Formally arranged as a multiple-choice examination, the novel mimics the format of the Academic Aptitude Test, a requirement for thirty years for students applying for university in Chile. The novel takes the form of a number of comprehension questions which ask readers to create their own connections of relevance between and across concepts. Meaning is created through how readers respond to and interact with these questions. As the novel progresses, readers completing the examination are able to "guide and restrict ways of thinking". These stylistic strategies establish a text that is both playful and subversive in its formal conventions and its social critique of Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship. Macrae specifically draws on Relevance Theory, which outlines the importance of inferences in construing literary meaning, in order to analyse the ways in which the novel challenges pragmatic processing and disrupts meaning making.

Alison Gibbons' article focuses on a similarly innovative, and problematic, genre through an extension of her recent studies of autofiction, a literary genre in which the line between fiction and autobiography becomes blurred, primarily through the inclusion of a character who resembles, and/or whom readers interpret as, the work's author. In contrast to literary-critical treatments of the genre, Gibbons adopts a cognitive approach drawing on Text

World Theory, Conceptual Blending Theory and reader response data to examine the experience of reading Michelle Tea's *Black Wave*. Gibbons argues that readers, aware of the autofictional stance they adopt in reading *Black Wave*, integrate mental representations triggered by the language of the novel with extra-textual knowledge they hold about the author to create a cognitive model that drives their responses to the novel and their assigning of autofictional status to it. Gibbons examines that this approach can help to account for the perceived effects of reading the genre, namely the sense of aligning a character with an author whilst still being aware of the "ontological duplicity of autofiction". Her chapter provides a convincing account of how readers are positioned to respond to *Black Wave* and, through the introduction of two new concepts, 'the author model' and 'cognitive dissonance', offers a template for future researchers interested in autofiction, readers and cognition.

In the final paper of the collection, Peter Stockwell outlines the development of science fiction from its origins in the nineteenth century through to its contemporary forms. For Stockwell, the genre is differentiated from other forms of modernism in that its experimental style is a more recent phenomenon. One of the key arguments that Stockwell raises is that experimentalism within the genre is not simply a part of the text's composition but instead has a more central function in the creation of texturally distinct worlds. Stockwell outlines how experimental style choices display iconicity, and thus highlight inseparable connections between form and meaning. His analysis considers how such experimental choices create distinct functional effects such as the estrangement of consciousness representation, explorations of the symbolic relationship between signifiers and signifieds, the positioning of readers through the disruption of layout, and the creation of cognitive overload through layering of semantic choices and optionality. These effects create immersive experiences that invite readers to enact and become complicit in the worlds of the text and create readings and

interpretations which hinge on “the feeling of world-building, its felt texture, rather than its mere inventory of objects”, distinctive to the science fiction genre

Together, the articles in this special issue provide a showcase of work in stylistics that draws on latest advances in the discipline, including cognitive approaches and empirical methods to literary reading. The articles demonstrate the value of modern stylistic scholarship to research on contemporary fiction and also, we hope, to the literary scholar coming to stylistics for the first time.

## References

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