

## **Stylistics and Critical Linguistics: observations on their intersection**

Many stylisticians are interested in the application of models of language to texts other than literary texts. Indeed, it has been an axiom of the present book that the methods of stylistics can be extended to forms of discourse beyond those conventionally associated with canonical literature. Most notably, stylistics, as a method of both analysis and interpretation, shares much common ground with **critical linguistics**, and some of the analytic procedures adopted in *Stylistics* make for useful cross-reference to those employed in *Language and Power*, the forthcoming book by Clare Walsh in the Routledge English Language Introductions series. Critical linguistics (CL) explores the ways in which power is mediated through discourse and in doing so seeks to empower subjects by raising awareness of how language is used in the public sphere. For example, CL uses linguistic analysis to explore (and ultimately to challenge) the ways in which print and broadcast media claim to present ‘commonsense values’ and ‘man in the street’ philosophies. What also interests critical linguists, in the context of media discourse, is how different newspapers tell the same ‘story’ by giving discourse emphasis to certain aspects of the event or by making certain elements stand in sharper relief to others. There are indeed different ways of saying the same thing: it is how something is said that is of particular interest to critical linguists.

### **Stylistics and Critical Linguistics: transitivity**

Although our own remit in *Stylistics* has been primarily to examine literary discourse, it is worth flagging up here how further critical linguistic application might be developed which makes use of the same models of language. The model of transitivity, elaborated in strand 6 of the book, is good case in point.

Consider by way of illustration a rather disturbing piece of text which offers the ‘official’ line on a death in police custody. This is part of a British Home Office statement which was issued on 9/12/96 concerning the death of a 33 year old Birmingham man while being detained by the police:

- (i) Following an assault on a custody officer, Mr. X was being moved from one part of a prison to another when he became unwell. Medical assistance was called. He was pronounced dead at 21.21 hours.

The system of transitivity offers various resources for capturing experience at the level of grammar, and the writer(s) of this report have engendered a particular kind of transitivity profile through a cluster of devices. This cluster includes the use of material processes (‘was being moved’, ‘was called’ and ‘was pronounced dead’) which, when delivered in the passive voice, allow the Actor role in the process to be ellipsed. This ellipsis extends both to the producer of the text (the ‘I’ that might otherwise have intruded as its author) and to the agents within the narrative like the custody officers who (presumably) are crucially involved in the events that lead up to the man’s death. Another interesting feature of transitivity is the use of nominalisation (see C.3, and further below), in ‘assault’, where the process has been represented as a noun rather than a verb. But perhaps the most striking feature of the statement is the key relational process ‘he became unwell’. This pattern is called upon in that delicate place in the text where it might seem

that the anonymous ‘movers’ may have had some influence over the man’s alarmingly sudden deterioration in health.

I don’t propose to analyse text (i) further, or to explore the particularised ideological significance of this piece of writing. However, for the purpose of comparison, it is interesting to place it in the context of another, related piece of text. Excerpt (ii) is from the report of an independent pathologist on the very same incident as that described in (i):

- (ii) The appearance of Mr. X’s body is definitely that of an asphyxial death. In my opinion death was due to the way he was handled. I am very concerned by the similarities of this case with that of Mrs. Y, who died while a police squad was attempting to deport her.

Short as this fragment is, its textual fabric certainly bears interesting comparison with the transitivity patterns evident in the Home Office version of events. I will leave it to readers to tease out the similarities, differences and significances for themselves.

### **Stylistics and Critical Linguistics: register**

Another area of study that unites stylisticians and critical linguists is an interest in the concept of **register** (see unit C.2), or perhaps more accurately, an interest in the way in which certain registers are deployed in certain discursive contexts. One particular concern, which has come to the fore generally in the study of modern English language is to do with the way powerful individuals and institutions have come to use, even to appropriate, particular registers of language.

As we saw in unit C.2. the term ‘register’ usefully links patterns in language to variations in situation, so what, in the context of this definition, can be said of the interconnection between register variation and the linguistic politics of power? Increasingly in the academic study of English language, issues concerning language and power have been located within broader theories of discourse and **ideology**. It is an important tenet of such work that the language used by powerful individuals and institutions be seen, not as neutral or value-free, but instead as shaped by a mosaic of political beliefs and institutional practices. Language, in other words, continuously articulates and sustains power. There are many aspects of linguistic organisation which work ‘silently’ to reproduce differences in power, but as our own day-to-day routines of language are largely unreflective, so the implicit agenda of many apparently innocuous registers is absorbed without notice.

Let us consider a particular case in point. In times of war and conflict, new registers of language are quietly disseminated through the print and broadcast media. In the specific context of the widespread proliferation of nuclear arms in the 1970s and 1980s, linguists adapted the term ‘Nukespeak’, in a conscious nod towards Orwell’s ‘Newspeak’, to refer to a (mis)use of register in order to mask what for the general public were unpleasant or problematic issues. Irrespective of political leaning, powerful bodies encourage us to see the world in particular ways, and in the ways *they* want. Moreover, ‘Nukespeak’ still reverberates in today’s discourses of war where, for instance, ‘human assets’ replaces the more human(e?) term ‘soldiers’, where the ‘reification of frontiers’

refers to an invasion of someone else's country, and 'collateral damage' helps get round the thorny problem of dead civilians. In its echo of a lurid medical condition, 'incontinent ordnance' covers the problem of badly aimed missiles, while 'human remains transportation pods' — 'body bags' to the rest of us — is the rather more sanitised label for something the very sight of which made many Americans sue for an end to the Vietnam war.

Let us consider a lengthier text in terms of the way register and power interlock. Withholding for the moment its original context, here is part of a seemingly rather innocuous report on vehicle maintenance:

### **Modifications to Vehicles in Service:**

In the light of observations, the following technical changes are needed:

1. The normal load is nine per square metre. In Saurer vehicles, which are very spacious, loading to full capacity would affect the vehicle's stability. A reduction in capacity seems necessary, rather than, as hitherto, reducing the number of items loaded.
2. Bulbs must be caged to prevent them being damaged. It has been observed that when the doors are closed, the merchandise presses hard against them. Light would therefore be useful both before and during the first few minutes of operation.
3. For easy cleaning of the vehicle, there must be a covered drain in the middle of the floor. The diameter should be between 200mm and 300mm. It should be a drain for liquids to escape during the operation.

Beneath this ostensibly bland and unassuming technical register is an agenda so appalling that it makes this the most disturbing piece of text I have encountered in twenty years as a professional teacher of English language. So extreme a remark is not offered lightly. On the face of it, the text bears all the trappings of the formal technical register. It abounds in technical and technically-related vocabulary ('diameter', '200mm', 'a reduction in capacity' and so on). Many of its sentences ('It has been observed . . .', 'Bulbs must be caged . . .' and so on) are cast in the passive voice (see unit A.6, and above) one function of which is, as is the norm in technical registers, to render the text 'anonymous' by removing personalised reference to the writer. Related to this is the use of nominalisation where processes are converted to nouns, as in 'loading', 'reduction' or 'cleaning'. Again, this type of grammatical operation removes from the process the individual responsible for engendering that process. Indeed, there is on the face of it much here that is similar in both vocabulary and grammar to the first of the two 'chemistry' examples provided in the discussion of register in section C.2 of the book.

However, only when its full context is revealed does the true horror of this piece of writing become apparent. This text is part of a communiqué sent by Saurer Vehicles (Berlin) to SS-Obersturmbannführer Walter Rauff on the 5th of June, 1942 (see

Lanzmann 1885). In the early days of 'the final solution', this text reports a test run in genocide, where a prototype van has been specially designed to pump poisonous exhaust fumes into the rear of the vehicle. With that context, the unassuming, even turgid style is clearly designed to disguise its grotesque, ghoulish portent. By now, readers will, I assume, have worked out the true referent of the generalised nouns like 'load', 'items' and 'merchandise', just as the significance of the processes described will have become transparent. It is worth adding that prior to the particular section cited here, the text's invisible author carefully notes, without irony, that '97,000 units' had been processed 'with no major incident'. With no major incident.

For as long as socially powerful forces are able to shape and influence language practices, stylisticians and critical linguists will continue to explore the widespread interconnections between register and power. Some years ago, an official report into English language teaching in Britain observed that 'the working of a democracy depends on the discriminating use of language on the part of all its people' (Kingman 1988). In this respect, exploring the way registers are used is empowering because to see through language is, as it were, is to see language for what it is. This is not to suggest for a moment that registers of language are of themselves insidious, sinister, or malevolent; but it is to suggest that in the hands of powerful interested parties the linguistic patterns encoded in a text encourage us to see the world in particular ways, and in ways which do not necessarily accord with our perspectives in and on society.

References > > >

Kingman Report of Inquiry into the Teaching of English Language (1988) HMS publications.

Lanzmann, Claude (1885) Shoah <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0090015/>

**See also:** Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust: The Complete Text of the Film Claude Lanzmann; preface by Simone de Beauvoir; English subtitles of the film by A. Whitelaw and W. Byron.

Further reading > > >

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Fowler, R. (1992) Language in the News London: Routledge.

Simpson, P. (1993) Language, Ideology and Point of View London: Routledge

Walsh, C. (forthcoming) Language and Power: A Resource Book for Students Routledge English Language Introductions. London: Routledge.