"It is, I believe, a fairly common experience for those who have engaged for a good many years in the profession of literary criticism, to slip, almost unconsciously, into a condition of mistrust of all their most familiar and general terms. The critic becomes dissatisfied with the vagueness of his activity, or his art; and he will indulge the fantastic dream that it might be reduced to the firm precision of a science."

(John Middleton Murry, The Problem of Style, 1922)

The current enthusiasm of some literary critics for the application of linguistic methods to the study of style in literary texts is, in my view, related to a difficulty inherent in the field of literary criticism itself. The terms employed by literary critics to describe and evaluate style do not seem to have, as John Middleton Murry puts it, "a constant and invariable significance." In recent years, certain critics have seen this as a very problematic issue. Richard Ohmann, for instance, has attacked the "impressionism" of such commonly used terms as "staccato," "involute," "masculine." A comparison of the style of Henry James to "a hippopotamus trying to pick up a pea" is for Ohmann less adequate than a discussion of the frequency of "embedded sentences" in the former's prose. Ohmann and certain other critics, among them Samuel Levin, Seymour Chatman, Michael Riffaterre and William O. Hendricks, have been seeking an objective basis for stylistic analysis in the rules and terminology of linguistic science. They claim that linguistics and literary criticism share the same objects of study i.e. the elements of language. Yet, even this seemingly obvious fact is, I


maintain, debatable. The objects of literary analysis may, perhaps, be far less tangible. A.C. Purves has claimed that:

Criticism is a description more of a state of consciousness of the critic than a description of the object being described. 3

Middleton Murry has suggested that the role of the critic is analogous to that of the creative artist: the critic should try to "recreate in his reader the peculiar emotion aroused in him by a work of literature." 4 Riffaterre, however, insists on a strict distinction between the "stimuli" which constitute the text and the "reactions" to that text. 5 Linguistic criticism, which examines the syntactic or phonological level of a text in isolation from aesthetic judgment or emotional response, depends very strongly on Riffaterre's being right. Another problem which confronts linguistics is that, being purely descriptive, it has no criteria for selecting the most important items in a text: it merely catalogues in great detail everything that is there. Linguistic critics themselves have admitted that there is inherent in their approach a problem of knowing how or whether to sift out those elements which are "literally active." 6

Some critics have performed analyses of texts, giving an exhaustive list of all the syntactic or phonological features. Dell Hymes, for example, has investigated the relative frequency of occurrence of phonemes in certain English sonnets. 7 Following up arguments from a paper by James Lynch, 8 he maintained that the word "silent" in Keats' "On

4 Murry, op. cit. p.7.
First Looking Into Chapman's Homer contained all the dominant phonemes of that sonnet. He concluded that "silent" was a "summative" word in the poem and expressed its theme. Thus Hymes has used phonology as the key to meaning, while retaining the rule of the "separability" of the linguistic levels i.e. not allowing semantic or syntactic observations to intervene during the phonological analysis. But Hymes is unhappy enough with his derivation of meaning from phonology to suggest that an independently interpreted structure of meaning is needed to test the significance of the sound data. 9 Riffaterre explains the notion that the separate linguistic levels each retell a poem's theme:

Of course, since language is a system made up of several levels superimposed one on top of the other (phonetic, phonological, syntactical, semantic, etc.), parallelism manifests itself on any level: so then, a poem is a verbal sequence wherein the same relations between constituents are repeated at various levels and the same story is told in several ways at the same time. 10

This argument, which Riffaterre presents only to be able to criticise it later in the same article, could be supported by examples of mimesis. Lexical content can be mimed by the syntax or phonology so that they seem to physically enact the meaning. The following passage from James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man employs syntactic symbolism:

The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.

The experience of uncertainty in the author's mind about the location of God is dramatised in the hurried shifting from one preposition to another. Linguistic criticism has provided tools which can be used to analyse the structure of the syntax here. The organisation of the syn-

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9 Dell H. Hymes, op. cit., p.39.
10 Riffaterre, op. cit., p.201.
tax into repeated elements (prepositions, predicative adjectives) forms a "syntagmatic coupling" (Levin),\textsuperscript{11} or linking of parallel items, which are "systematically foregrounded" (Jan Mukařovský),\textsuperscript{12} or heavily emphasised in the passage. I do not think, however, that the syntax does "tell the same story" as the semantic juxtapositioning; rather, the syntax provides a frame within which those semantic elements can modify each other and jar against each other. It is the lexical content which brings home the stylistic effect of the sentence: ironic humour about the irrelevance of the existence of God for mankind. An integrated and simultaneous approach is required instead of a focussing on separate levels. In the following example, the number of syllables in the words "elephantine cumbersomeness" imitates the ponderous and slow-moving nature of the "system":

That system, for all its elephantine cumbersomeness, is also, in the long run, wonderfully adaptable and flexible.\textsuperscript{13}

But the connotations of the lexical items simultaneously contribute to the effect.

There are further dangers of the separate level procedure. Critics have noted that linguistic elements may be repeated without any deliberate intention on the part of the author to achieve a literary effect.\textsuperscript{14} Moreover, ambiguity may be present in one linguistic structure but, nevertheless, a reference to it in a literary interpretation would lead to error. This extract from W.B. Yeats' The Statues is syntactically ambiguous:

\textsuperscript{14} See, for example, Jan Mukařovský, \textit{On Poetic Language} (Yale University Press, 1976), translated by John Burbank and Peter Steiner, p.27.
No! Greater than Pythagoras, for the men
That with a mallet or a chisel modelled these
Calculations that look but casual flesh, put down
All Asiatic vague immensities,
And not the banks of oars that swam upon
The many-headed foam at Salamis.

Syntactically, "the banks of oars . . . Salamis" can be the object of "put down" or it can be the subject of that verb in a sentence here truncated according to the rules of ellipsis. However, I think that a consideration of the general theme of the whole poem would leave only one possible reading. The theme seems to be the triumph of the cultural values of Greece, classicism and order, over the barbarian formlessness and chaos of Asia. Therefore, "the banks of oars . . . Salamis" must be the subject of the verb in a sentence which claims that the physical might of Greece was not the actual reason for the defeat of Asia. In this case, a literary intuition must be set against a mechanical linguistic reading.

The notion of separability also has a part to play in the debate over the existence and nature of style. Nils Erik Enkvist has asked the question: Does style exist? Can style as "manner" or "expression" be detached from the "matter" or content of a text? Walter Alfred Koch has suggested that two phrases (e.g. strong man, beefy guy) have a semantic core consisting of what they share in meaning and a semantic differential (i.e. style) which distinguishes between them. Style is, therefore, an addition or ornament superimposed on the basic content. This point of view has a long history and it is certainly not confined to linguistic critics. Stendhal wrote of style as an "addition to a given thought of all the circumstances calculated to produce the whole effect

that the thought ought to produce." But there is an alternative standpoint: style and content fused together, neither having any independent existence. Flaubert strongly believed this:

La forme est un manteau. Mais non! la forme est la chair même de la pensée, comme la pensée est l'âme de la vie. 18

The onus is on those who believe that style is an addition to find texts written in language which is so plain, so neutral that it is pure "styleless" content. Thomas Kane and Leonard Peters wrote a passage which was intended to be a flat, unemotive alternative to a richly expressive and metaphorical passage by Joyce. They claimed that their text had referential meaning, but very little expressive meaning.

1. The streets, shuttered for the repose of Sunday, swarmed with a gaily-coloured crowd. Like illumined pearls the lamps shone from the summits of their tall poles upon the living texture below, which, changing shape and hue unceasingly, sent up into the warm grey evening air an unchanging, unceasing murmur. (James Joyce, *Two Gallants*)

2. It was Sunday night. The streets were full of people in their Sunday clothes. The street lights were on, and all sorts of people were on the sidewalks. They were walking up and down and talking. (Kane and Peters) 19

However, Kane and Peters also say that their text could in certain circumstances be expressive. Their choice of short sentences, a sequence of verbs in the past simple tense and bare, colourless vocabulary seems like a very mediocre imitation of Hemingway's style. Perhaps much more

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rigorous linguistic methods are required in order to discover "styleless" alternatives to a text.

Richard Ohmann in a now famous article maintained that transformational grammar should be used to derive the paraphrase to a given text. If transformations are meaning-preserving, then the content of the text is not altered by transformations performed on it. Part of Ohmann's article concentrated on an extract from D.H. Lawrence's Studies in Classic American Literature. The extract looked as if it might have gone through certain deletion transformations from another hypothetical passage. Here is a section of the Lawrence passage with the supposed deletions in square brackets:

We can't go back. And Melville couldn't [go back]. [Melville couldn't go back] much as he hated the civilized humanity he knew. He couldn't go back to the savages. He wanted to [go back to the savages]. He tried to [go back to the savages]. And he couldn't [go back to the savages].

Ohmann says that the Lawrence text is "brusque" and "truncated" and that style is simply the difference between a text and its transformationally derived alternative. Style exists, therefore, merely as a comparison between a text and a "might have been." Would not the latter also have to invent characters, plot, motifs to contrast with the original? Surely we can devise alternatives to a passage according to whichever aspects of it we wish to highlight. Here are two contrasting accounts of events in the life of St. Joan:

1. She was in her 13th year when, in her father's garden, she heard for the first time a voice from God. During the next five years she heard the voices two or three times a week.

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2. She was in her 13th year when, in her father's garden, she said she heard for the first time a voice from God. During the next five years she affirmed that she heard the voices two or three times a week.\textsuperscript{22}

The first account expresses complete confidence in the story of St. Joan. The second casts a shadow of doubt. This is done by introducing non-factive verbs which indicate that the writer does not presuppose the truth of their complements.\textsuperscript{23} Apart from this type of exercise, the objections to Ohmann lie within the generative grammar model itself. Chomsky has said that "the rules of stylistic ordering are very different from the grammatical transformations." Style for Chomsky is a matter of performance not grammar.\textsuperscript{24} A criticism which has often been levelled at Ohmann is that, since TG is a sentence-based theory, he is forced to consider each sentence individually and not as part of a textual whole. If Ohmann were dealing with texts far less uniform in style than the Lawrence one, each sentence might seem to require a totally different transformation and it might not be obvious what the stylistic alternative should look like. A stylistics which reveals the differences between texts can be a comparative stylistics only; it ignores the structural properties of any particular text which make that text what it is in its own right.

Some linguistic criticism has, however, concerned itself with devices of cohesion in literature, particularly in poetry. One of the hallmarks of poetry, according to Levin, is its "special kind of unity."\textsuperscript{25} Mukarovsky claimed that the "systematic foregrounding"\textsuperscript{26} of certain repeated elements (e.g. rhyme, alliteration) gave poetic texts a unity

\textsuperscript{22} Kane and Peters, op. cit., p.600.
\textsuperscript{24} Quoted in William O. Hendricks, \textit{Grammar of Style and Styles of Grammar} (North Holland Publishing Company, 1976), p.44.
\textsuperscript{25} Levin, op. cit., p.9.
\textsuperscript{26} See Mukarovsky, op. cit.
not found in texts of the "standard language." Levin calls the use of these repeated elements "syntagmatic coupling." In my view, however, "syntagmatic coupling" is not peculiar to poetry but is also found in other contexts. Advertising slogans like the following may foreground assonance:

Drinka pinta milka day

A high degree of foregrounding is not necessarily a clear indicator of great poetry. This piece of humorous verse which makes maximum use of the phoneme /i:/ is not therefore exceptionally "poetic" because of it:

When greedy Eve in Eden
Seized fruit from off the tree
And wheedled heedless Adam
To yield and eat, and he
Weakened to her entreaties
And ate with fiendish glee
She needed to have heeded
The sequel to her spree.

Some approaches to the interpretation of cohesion in poetry seem to me a little inflexible. Levin, while discussing the view that poetry is more condensed or compressed than prose, analysed the following lines by Emily Dickinson in terms of shared semantic features: 27

When Etna basks and purrs,
Naples is more afraid
Than when she shows her Garnet tooth;
Security is loud.

Levin said that "purrs" includes the features [+ Contented] and [+ Sound], "basks" includes the feature [+ Heat]. There is a comparative structure in the stanza: "more afraid than." Levin suggested that the terms on the other side of the comparison had equivalent features. Thus "shows her Garnet tooth," a metaphor for volcanic eruption, is [+ Heat]. The two

other terms [+ Contented] and [+ Sound] return in the last line, which is outside the comparative sentence: "Security" [+ Contented] and "loud" [+ Sound]. This rigid matrix of cohesion ignores some of the other links in the stanza. For instance, there is a disproportion between items which are compared to one another: e.g. the powerful volcano Etna is compared to a mere cat and the eruption is described in a low, undramatic key, but all the more menacingly for that.

Absurdist literature, which has dislocation and breakdown of communication as its major themes, may be expected to mirror these in a violation of the principles of "textual well-formedness." Is this dislocation linguistically analysable? Samuel Beckett in Waiting for Godot here omits the antecedent required to identify the anaphoric pronoun "him":

Vladimir: The third says that both of them abused him.
Estragon: Who?
Vladimir: What?
Estragon: What's all this about? Abused who?
Vladimir: The Saviour.

The third what? We have not been told of either the first or the second. The use of short elliptical forms is a recurring device in the play: it is intended to confuse and delay communication. But grammar is by no means a full explanation of what is going on. Our extra-linguistic knowledge tells us that the passage is supposed to remind us of the story of Christ and the two thieves who were being crucified with him. The Bible story is here misquoted and garbled, probably with the intention of displaying it from an unfamiliar angle and of questioning the truth of some of our most fundamental beliefs.

Apart from cohesion, the other major pre-occupation of linguistic criticism seems to be the "deviation" of literary language from a norm set by the standard language. Poetic language is seen as more novel and original than standard language. Deviation refers to metaphor, unusual collocations and, in generative grammar terms, the violation of selectival restrictions or strict subcategorization rules. However, much of poetry is very like normal language and a high concentration of deviant
collocations may not always be a good thing. Robert Southwell's poem "I dye alive" repeats the same oxymoron to the point of extreme banality:

I live, but such a life as ever dyes (1.5)
My death to end my dying life denyes
And life my living death no whitt amends (11. 7-8)

The generative grammar model explains personification, for example, as a process whereby a non-human noun has transferred to it the feature [+ Human] so that it can combine with a verb that takes human subjects only. But a violation of selectional restrictions does not necessarily produce a striking, effective metaphor. Clichés such as "she flew off the handle" and "she blew her top" are so much a part of everyday use that they no longer seem either striking or deviant. Many metaphorical descriptions of objects (e.g. teeth of a saw, leg of a chair) are not perceived as metaphors at all. When does a violation of a selectional restriction equal a metaphor and when is a metaphor poetic? Rosemarie Gläser has pointed out that deviation does not tell us anything about the interpretation or effect of a metaphor in a particular context. She discusses similes, too, and gives examples where the isolation of features fails to explain the meaning of a simile. In "John works like a horse," "John" and "horse" differ by the feature [+ Human]. But we still do not know how John works. It is left to individual interpretation or, in this case, our prior understanding of a fixed and well-known simile.

Particular stylistic effects of deviation are difficult to explain in a set of general rules. Does effectiveness increase with the degree of dissimilarity between the items compared? An example of a comic effect is Lady Bracknell's remark to Jack in Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest that she will not allow her daughter to "marry into a cloakroom and form an alliance with a parcel." "Cloakroom" substitutes for the usual item "family" and "parcel" for "person." The comedy is in

28 Rosemarie Gläser, "The Application of Transformational Generative Grammar to Similes and Metaphors in Modern English," Style V (Fall 1971, No. 3) p.274.
our range of associations with these words and not in a simple statement of dissimilarity.

Many linguistic critics seem to be shy of using theories of semantics in their interpretations, probably because the science of semantics has not advanced as far as that of syntax or phonology. Componential analysis, for example, which atomises the meaning of lexical items cannot be used to specify their connotations in different contexts. The negative connotations of some words (e.g. dither, dawdle, connive) seem as permanent as their referential meanings. Surely the word "stupidly" must always be pejorative. There is a passage in *Paradise Lost* where Satan is almost deflected from his intention to corrupt Eve:

That space the Evil One abstracted stood
From his own evil, and for the time remained
Studpidly good, of enmitie disarmed
Of guile, of hate, of envy, of revenge

(Bk. IX, ll.463-467)

"Stupidly," oddly combined with "good," is in favourable contrast with the truly evil characteristics of Satan.

The interpretation of a few lines in a play may require reference to a large number of other lines in various parts of the play. I would like to consider this speech of Macbeth:

Had I but died an hour before this chance
I had liv'd a blessed time; for, from this instant
There's nothing serious in mortality.
All is but toys, renown and grace is dead
The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees
Is left this vault to brag of.

(*Macbeth*, II, 3)

Macbeth, immediately after he has murdered Duncan, admits that he has broken all social and religious bonds and that he has rendered his own life pointless. Macbeth has put himself in a religious sense outside "grace." "The wine of life" may be intended to remind us of the wine of communion, which Macbeth cannot now share. His deed is particularly
wicked because, as other lines in the play reveal, Duncan is associated
with sacredness: he is the "Lord's anointed." Macbeth's feeling that
his life is now pointless is both here expressed and reiterated later
in the play:

I have lived long enough: my way of life
Is fallen into the sear, the yellow leaf;

(Macbeth, V, 4)

Thus, each line of the play has more than a local grammatical signifi-
cance: each line reflects other lines and contributes to the develop-
ment of the theme and the dramatic action. Roland Barthes has suggested
that each sentence in a play is an interweaving of several codes: lin-
guistic, rhetorical, actional, hermeneutic, and symbolic.29 The linguis-
tic nature of a line in a play may not be very interesting but, never-
theless, that line may have great structural and thematic importance.
The last line of Act I of Waiting for Godot is "Let's go." But the char-
acters do not move and are in the same spot at the beginning of Act II.
This line in its context reveals the incapacity of the characters to act
and also develops the theme of the circularity of all experience, which
is so important in the play.

In my opinion, literary language does not aim for novelty or deviation
as ends in themselves but there is an attempt to re-awaken our percep-
tion of life by "deautomatising" (Mukařovský's phrase) standard lan-
guage. It enables us to see life in terms other than the clichés and
banalities of everyday language:

People living at the seashore grow so accustomed to the murmur
of the waves that they never hear it. By the same token, we
scarcely ever hear the words we utter... 30

Linguistic criticism is in danger of concentrating on the mechanics of
literary composition and also, perhaps, of overemphasising the oddities
of language in literary texts.

29 Roland Barthes, "Style and its Image" in Literary Style: A Symposium,
30 Victor Shklovsky. Quoted in Anne Cluysenaar, Introduction to Literary
Povzetek

POMANJKLJIVOSTI JEZIKOVNE RAZČLEMBE LITERARNIH BESEDIL


1 Ti poskusi so se začeli z objavo članka ""Les Chats" de Charles Baudelaire" Clauda Levi-Straussa in Romana Jakobsona v časopisu L’Homme 2, 1962.