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Is Stylistics a Controversial Branch of Language Study?

1 Key Notions of Stylistics

Stylistics has been considered “a developing and controversial field of study” (Crystal and Davy, 1969, vii) for several decades. The existing approaches to stylistic analysis are numerous and diverse, causing difficulties to a researcher striving to apply methods of stylistic analysis and to draw distinct lines of demarcation between them. As aptly pointed out by Hoffmannová (1997:5), stylistics is a field of study which is not only highly interdisciplinary but also considerably eclectic.

In my contribution I will make an attempt at surveying some of the key features generally associated with the concept of **style**. Factors determining the use of language, such as **variation**, **distinctiveness** and **choice** will be questioned against the diverse concepts of stylistics and style current in British and Czech literature on the subject.

At the same time, discrepancies in the understanding of the terms **style** and **register** will be clarified. The terms are neither identical nor interchangeable, each of them providing a different evaluation of style-constituting properties.

Since foreign learners cannot rely on their intuition, it is inevitable to cultivate their stylistic awareness, both in the theoretical aspects and practical application (cf. Crystal and Davy 1969). In my considerations I will try to answer the question posed by Enkvist (1964:3): “What must we do to give the students of a foreign language a sense of style in that language”?

2 Functional Interpretation of Style

The functional approach to style is a common point of departure in both Czech and British linguistic traditions: each style fulfills a specific function in the social context. In this respect, similar standpoints can be traced in the interpretation of style and stylistics by the Prague School (Mathesius 1982), in the functionalism of Halliday (1994), in the theoretical

preliminaries of the founders of British linguistic stylistics Crystal and Davy (1969) and in the theoretical views adopted by Fowler (1996) as a representative of critical discourse analysis.

However, the delimitation of style as well as the choice of respective terminology to cover this field of study has been entirely different in the Czech linguistic thinking and in the English tradition. In British sources the basic notion in stylistics is no longer termed style; in contemporary works devoted to stylistic aspects the basic notion is that of **register**.

3 The Notion of Style in British and Czech Linguistic Tradition

In Crystal's reference book *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* stylistics is defined as "a branch of linguistics which studies the features of SITUATIONally distinctive uses (VARIETIES) of LANGUAGE, and tries to establish principles capable of accounting for particular choices made by individual and social groups in their use of language"(1992.332). All the three key features which are considered highly relevant with regard to style, variation, distinctiveness and choice, are incorporated in this definition. In this dictionary the term style, however, is not recognized as an independent entry suitable to serve as a technical term.

Fowler (1966.15) originally gives the following definition of style: "Style - a property of all texts, not just literary - may be said to reside in the manipulation of variables in the structure of a language, or in the selection of optional or 'latent' features".

In his later evaluation, Fowler (1996.185) rejects the term style as a working term, arguing that it lacks precision. He claims that "the word has an inevitably blurring effect, because the kinds of regularities referred to are so diverse in their nature". Although style has been re-defined by him as "a recognizable and characteristic way of doing something", such delimitation is too broad to be called a definition. Instead, Fowler prefers the sociolinguistic term **register**. In Fowler's definition "a register is [...] a distinctive use of language to fulfill a particular communicative function in a particular kind of situation [...] (1996.191). A sociolinguistic term has been chosen, which seems to be better suited to the phenomenon of style which is **socially determined**.

In the Prague School the role of the situation in formulating the message was duly stressed by Mathesius: "Každá promluva má svůj vlastní věcný obsah a vyrůstá ze zvláštní situace a v každé se obráží aktuální postoj mluvčího ke skutečnosti, kterou promluva vyjadřuje, a jeho vztah k posluchači, ať skutečnému, nebo myšlenému"(1982.93).

[Every utterance has its own referential content and stems from a particular situation in which the current attitude of the speaker to the reality expressed by the utterance is reflected, together with the attitude to the concrete or envisaged hearer"; translated into English by L.U.]

The stress on the fact that every utterance stems from a particular situation gives evidence of the contextual approach adopted by the Prague School. A recent Czech definition of the term style can be found in Čechová, Chloupek, Krčmová and Minářová. The definition does not include any mention of the situation-dependent usage: "Jazykový styl [...] je způsob cílevědomého výběru a uspořádání (organizování) jazykových prostředků, který se uplatňuje při genezi textu; v hotovém komunikátu se pak projevuje jako princip organizace jazykových jednotek, který z částí a jednotlivostí tvoří jednotu vyhovující komunikačnímu záměru autora" (1997.9).

[A language style [...] is a method of goal-oriented choice and arrangement (organisation) of language means which is applied in the making of the text; in the final product it is thus reflected as the principle of organizing language units which, out of parts and details, shapes a unity compatible with the communicative intention of the author"; translated into English by L.U.]

3.1 Variation

In contemporary linguistics language is considered to be a heterogeneous phenomenon whose major characteristic feature is that of **variation**: "It is generally accepted nowadays by linguists of all theoretical persuasions that there is, in reality, no such thing as a homogeneous, stylistically and socio-expressively undifferentiated language system" (Lyons 1995.340).

In British linguistics two types of variation in language are generally acknowledged: variations as to **the use in social situations** and variations **according to the user**.

The first type of variation is called **register**. Crystal's definition of the term register stresses its conditioning by the social situation in which a variety appears: "[...] the term refers to a VARIETY of LANGUAGE defined according to its use in social SITUATIONS..."

Fowler's definition of the register lays stress on the context in which it is used: "Varieties of a language according to the use to which it is being put, and the context in which it is uttered, are known as registers" (1996.33). Thus it is the use which is the centre of attention of language scholars in the study of registers.

In his interpretation of the varieties of English, Crystal (1988.95) specifies the variation determined by **group identities**: "The more a group of people are given the status of a social

institution within a community, the more distinctive their language is likely to be. The most idiosyncratic varieties of English are those associated with the church and law.” A sample of written legal discourse below gives evidence of the intricate style of legal documents.

Example 1

Notwithstanding the termination of the hiring under Clause 6 the Hirer shall pay all rent accrued due in respect of the hiring up to the date of such termination and shall be or remain liable in respect of any damage caused to the Owner by reason of any breach by the Hirer of any stipulation herein contained and on part of the Hirer to be performed or observed.
(Crystal, D.-Davy, D.: *Investigating English Style*. 1969.196)

The second type of variation which is called a **personal dialect** represents the user’s individual variety called **idiolect**. It is shaped primarily by the regional and social characteristics of the speaker, the most decisive factor being considered his/her education. The idiolect of the speaker is manifested in his/her pronunciation variety, lexical choices and grammatical patterns and reflects social class.

Example 2

“We’re just gonna sneak up on ol’ Leroy. Probably he think it gonna be Shirlene at the door. I just hope he don’t come to the door too happy, you know what I mean?”
(Evanovich, J: *Three to Get Deadly*. Introducing Great New Books from Penguin.1997.23)

3.2 Distinctiveness

Distinctions between the choices made by the speaker in rendering the message are due, among other things, to the functions of language which prevail in the given discourse. A style in which the **referential function** prevails (matter-of-fact style, in Czech věcný styl) differs considerably from the style in which the **expressive** and the **conative functions** are dominant. Holmes (1992.14) tackles the relationship between the referential content and the affective content of the message and states that the two components are mutually interrelated. If the content of the message is mainly referential, it is less affective, and vice versa.

Example 3

So language can be seen as distinctive because of its intricate association with the human mind and with human society. It is related to both cognition and communication.
(Widdowson, H.G.: *Linguistics*. 1996.15)

Example 4

I've done this with kids at school not the same as I this but you know my dread is always hearing what you have said because I think your own voice sounds horrible (S.1.7 154-160)

3.3. Choice

Characterizing the choice the user has in expressing himself/herself, we usually have in mind the meaning potential of a particular language. Style can be defined as choice from linguistic possibilities. The meaning potential consists of the means already existing in the language as well as the means which can potentially come into being. This process is called **re-accentuation** through which new meanings are created on the basis of new contextual specifications.

Example 5

Lady Caroline: *You have no country houses , I am told, in America?*

Hester: *We have not many.*

Lady Caroline: *Have you any country? What we should call country?*

Hester: *We have the largest country in the world, Lady Caroline. They used to tell us at school that some of our states are as big as France and England put together.*

(Wilde, O.: *A Woman of No Importance*. Penguin Popular Classics 1996.1)

4 Contrastive Approaches to Stylistic Analysis

In contemporary British stylistics two contrastive approaches to stylistic analysis are distinguished. It can be argued that each of them brings valuable observations about the way language is organized in different styles.

The first approach can be called traditional. The text is viewed as a final product of the producer's activity: "Style, viewed as a particular choice of language made by an author, in a sense embodies that author's achievement, and way of experiencing and interpreting the world" (Leech et al. 1982.158).

A more recent approach understands the text as a dynamic entity in which the meanings are unfolded and discovered by the recipient in the process of its interpretation. The change of perspective is connected with the distinction between **text and discourse**.

Fowler (1996.111) specifies the text in the following way: "To look at language as text entails the study of whole units of communication seen as coherent syntactic and semantic structures which can be spoken or written down".

The discourse, however, is not only a language product, it reflects **extra-linguistic** factors: "Discourse is the whole complicated process of linguistic interaction between people uttering and comprehending texts. To study language as discourse requires, therefore, attention to facets of structure which relate to the participants in communication, to the actions they perform through uttering texts, and to the contexts within which the discourse is conducted (1996.111).

4.1 Text as Product

In the text-as-product view, the text as a coherent piece of language is analysed from bottom to top, according to the individual levels of language seen in their interrelation (see Crystal and Davy 1969). In this view the text is interpreted as **static**.

Bakhtin mentions a **passive** understanding in which the actual meaning of the utterance is not grasped: "A passive understanding of linguistic meaning is no understanding at all, it is only the abstract aspect of meaning" (1994.281).

In this method of analysis the investigation of spoken language usually starts at the phonetic/ phonological level. In written language the graphetic/graphological devices are analysed. Other levels of analysis comprise the grammatical, lexical and semantic levels. The final description is presented as a **mosaic of stylistic markers** constituting the style.

4.2 Discourse as Process

Another possible angle from which a style can be analysed is a **discourse-as-process view**. The style is seen as an entity dependent on the process of interaction between the producer and the recipient. In Bakhtin's view, the text is based on **dialogism**: "Responsive understanding is a fundamental force, one that participates in the formulation of discourse, and it is moreover an *active* understanding [...]" (1994.280). The text is thus seen as a contextually determined entity which is shared by the producer and the recipient and the interpretation of which remains open.

The notion of **interactive meaning** is explained by Thomas: "[...] meaning is not something which is inherent in the words alone, nor is it produced by the speaker alone, nor by the hearer alone. Making meaning is a dynamic process, involving the negotiation of meaning between the speaker and the hearer, the context of utterance (physical, social and linguistic) and the meaning potential of an utterance" (1995.22)

5 Stylistically Significant Features

Styles differ according to features which influence the speaker's /writer's choice of means of expression. In this brief overview the most relevant features having a direct bearing on the delimitation of styles will be discussed. Halliday (1978) has introduced three concepts which are crucial in the interpretation of messages, namely **field**, **tenor** and **mode**. These concepts have been used as reliable indicators of stylistic differences. Field, tenor and mode are factors influencing the choice of language means and posing limitations on the repertoire of phonological, grammatical and lexical devices.

5.1 Field

Field of discourse (or field) entails "a classification of REGISTERS in terms of subject-matter" (Crystal 1992.136). The topic under discussion is highly relevant with regard to the choice of means of expression resulting in a particular style.

Everyday topics in face-to-face conversation are characterized by the use of basic vocabulary. Grammatical structures tend to be simple, elliptical, or incomplete. Frequent reductions of the sound structure (contracted forms, assimilations etc.) are manifestations of the style of speaking which is called casual or relaxed.

Example 6

it's just the shop on the bridge just does everything cheaper I mean you know it's got everything if ever you wanted some parts of this I would always try it (S.1.7 855-859)

Sophisticated topics in such areas of human activity as science and law require the use of elaborate means of expression with regard to vocabulary, grammar and phonological structure. The stratification of English vocabulary according to its origin is matched by the triple synonymy distinction revealing semantic and stylistic differentiation.

In covering sophisticated topics long, polysyllabic words of foreign origin having a high degree of abstraction dominate. The grammatical structure of elaborate styles is thorough, complete and precise. Cohesive devices are important signals of textual unity and indicate the crucial points in the structure of the text.

Example 7

*All the text types listed in the first paragraph fit the characterisation of text as visible evidence of a purposeful interaction between writers and readers. Thus at one extreme an academic textbook is the visible evidence of an interaction between an academic and undergraduates, in which the academic seeks to encapsulate the state of knowledge in a particular discipline in order that the undergraduates may have a coherent overview of the discipline and be able to place any particular aspect of the discipline within the larger whole. (Hoey, M: *Textual Interaction*. Routledge 2003.11)*

5.2 Tenor

The term tenor indicates the relationship between the participants in discourse. From the sociolinguistic point of view, the interlocutors are characterized according to whether they show **solidarity** or **distance**, according to their **status** reflecting power relations which can be either symmetrical or asymmetrical, and with regard to the **level of formality** which they have adopted in their communication (cf. Holmes 1992). In Example 8 below the speakers show solidarity, equality and informality.

Example 8

A *and what I like about it is it's not all new branded stuff but it's not all rubbish*

B *yeah* (S.1.7 871-874)

In Example 9 the relationship between the interlocutors in conversation is asymmetrical (an academic talking to a prospective undergraduate). Distance and formality are manifested in the choice of devices, e.g. the passive construction and vague specifications.

Example 9

B *I mean you are aware that in taking English as an academic subject rather than a **shall I say** a cultural subject that **a good deal of linguistic study is involved***

A *yes* (S.3.1 708-712)

5.3 Mode

The term mode is delimited by Crystal (1992.220) as “a term used in HALLIDAYAN classification of LANGUAGE VARIETIES, referring to the MEDIUM of language activity which determines the role played by the language in a situation”. Mode of discourse is also called **channel** through which communication passes.

The traditional division into **spoken mode** and **written mode** has been kept. However, there is a strong tendency in present usage to dissolve this dichotomy and produce types of communication which are **hybrid** in the sense that features of both modes are merged (advertisements, chats, talk-shows, e-mails etc.).

The distinction between speaking and writing is based on a different hierarchy of language functions which operate in these modes. Spoken language is characterized by a strong presence of expressive and conative elements, whereas written language is closely connected with the “intellectual content” (Vachek 1976.414). In Halliday’s view, the distinction between speech and writing can be explained as the difference between a process (speech) and a product (writing). Halliday claims that “writing exists, whereas speech happens” (1994.xxii).

5.3.1 Spoken Language

The distinction which is made when studying spoken language concerns the dichotomy **private vs. public**. The existence of corpora (e.g. *A Corpus of English Conversation*, *the Spoken English Corpus*, *British National Corpus*) make it possible to study long stretches of authentic conversation representing **impromptu speech**.

Private conversation (face-to-face conversation) is unprepared and produced on the spot. It is loosely structured and organized in long clause-complexes (cf. Halliday 1990). In private conversation interlocutors show a high degree of involvement and subjectivity, attitudinal meanings are prevalent.

Example 10

B *it's the thing I have against the picture club that they are many of them are competent people's failures you know canvasses which ought to have been thrown away have been lent to the picture club I mean it's not the sort of thing you don't want to be inspired by somebody's horrors*

A *no you want something round you when you think it when you look at it you think oh yes don't you you don't always want to be re-making the picture that's what I've been doing*

(S.1.8 160-172)

Public speaking style is largely connected with the media. A passage from the transcript of the interview below features Larry King and Arnold Schwarzenegger in a political interview on CNN. Public speaking style (e.g. an interview on the radio or a panel discussion on television) is rather impersonal and detached, using vague and impersonal expressions.

Example 11

King: *Does it bother you, though, that **some elements in the state** will be forced to vote differently than others, that **people** will have to deal with chads and the kind of confusion Florida had? Doesn't that bother you?*

Schwarzenegger: *Well, no, I mean, the thing is that it's the **very same system** that has elected Davis and Bustamante the last time, so how bad can it be, right? I mean, it's **the same system**, so why change it now? So I think they should move forward. I think that we have to listen to what **the people** want. And **the people** very clearly, have said we want to have a recall. I think if you look at the polls, that 55 to 60 percent of **the people** who say they want to have a recall.*

*So I think it will be a mistake, like I said, you know, to now change that. **For me, in my mind, you know, there's...*** (CNN, Larry King Live, aired September 17, 2003 - 21:00 ET)

5.3.2 Written Language

The difference between spoken and written language can be seen in three significant aspects: structure, content and the character of communication.

In writing **the linear development and fluency** are dominant discourse features, whereas in speaking the “circular” character of the message can be observed: the topic(s) are recurrent. The language is characterized by **normal non-fluency** (Crystal-Davy 1969.104). Written messages are more compact and condensed (Vachek 1976.337-352), brevity of expression is expected.

The **content of the message** in the written form is more intellectual (Vachek 1976. 414), due to the planned activity and careful choice of the language means by the writer. The writer is **matter-of-fact**, more **formal** and more **abstract** compared with the speaker.

In conclusion it can be stated that written language is **static**, whereas spoken language is **dynamic**. Written texts are planned, finished products, while spoken communication is an ongoing process which is usually unprepared, or partly prepared.

Example 12

Written language

Present-day London continues to grow, though decentralisation policies and the development of 'new towns' well outside London area have tried to curb expansion within greater London itself. The building of new road and motorway schemes and the increasing number of office blocks gives parts of London a concrete jungle look known in so many cities.

(The Book of London 1987)

Example 13

Spoken language

A *but I think London is one of the few places where you have to create your own relaxation the place itself doesn't encourage you*

B *not at all not oh*

A *yes I think it's very bad for you know your general tone of living in London and not only because of the hurry but because of the sheer waste of time you know when I stand for ten minutes or five to cross a road I follow the other people I get run over or nearly (S.1.8 621-639)*

6 Domain and Province

The content of the message is closely connected with another term which is **sociolinguistic** in nature, namely **domain**. This term is defined as “a group of institutionalised social situations typically constrained by a common set of behavioural rules” (Crystal 1992.112). In certain situations certain types of speech behaviour are expected from the user as part of the **social norm**.

The term domain is comparable, though not identical, with the term **province** which is defined “with reference to the kind of occupational or professional activity being engaged in” (Crystal 1969. 71). The sphere of activity and the social role which the speaker performs pose requirements on his/her linguistic choices.

In English the process of **codification** is natural, no institutional codification has taken place and all the sources which deal with the norm (dictionaries, grammar books, stylistic manuals etc.) are thus merely **descriptive**. Czech language, on the other hand, has undergone institutional codification and the norm is **prescribed** to its users.

7 Category of Formality

Formality is a sociolinguistic category which has been defined as “a level of language considered APPROPRIATE to socially formal situations” (Crystal 1992.141). A socially formal situation is reflected in social distance, impersonality, a high degree of politeness, lack of imposition in speech and writing, as shown in the example below.

Example 14

Lady Hunstanton: Dear Caroline, how kind of you! I think we all do fit in very nicely together. And I hope our charming American visitor will carry back pleasant recollections of our English country life.

(O. Wilde: *A Woman of No Importance*. Penguin Popular Classics 1996.3)

On the contrary, informality is “a style of writing or conversational speech characterized by simpler grammatical structures, more familiar vocabulary, and greater use of idioms and metaphors” (entry definition in *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*).

Example 15

“Had his head screwed on, whoever he was. I read it in the paper somewhere. There’s no such thing as a free lunch”.

(Lodge, D.: *Nice Work*. Penguin Books 1988.116)

8 Acceptability and Appropriateness

Crystal and Davy stress **linguistic awareness** and **linguistic appropriateness** with regard to style and claim that “The native speaker of English of course has a great deal of intuitive knowledge about linguistic appropriateness and correctness - when to use one variety of language rather than another - which he has amassed over the years” (1969.5), while the foreign learner has “no intuitive sense of linguistic appropriateness in English at all: he has no awareness of conventions of conformity, because he has not grown up in the relevant linguistic climate”(1969.6). Manuals of English style stress the need for intelligibility and clarity of expression. Fowler& Fowler (1970.11) emphasize that the writer should be “direct, simple, brief, vigorous and lucid”.

The most demanding stylistic aspects for Czech learners of English are the distinction between **formality and informality** in discourse, use of **politeness strategies**, use of **indirect speech acts** and the distinction between **nominal and verbal ways of expression**.

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