1 Language and style

1.1 What is stylistics?

Stylistics has been defined as a sub-discipline of linguistics that is concerned with the systematic analysis of style in language and how this can vary according to such factors as, for example, genre, context, historical period and author (Crystal and Davy 1969: 9 and Leech 2008: 54). For instance, there is the individual style that distinguishes one writer from another, the styles associated with particular genres (e.g. ‘newspaper language’ or the gothic novel), or the characteristics of what might constitute ‘literary’ style. In this sense, analysing style means looking systematically at the formal features of a text and determining their functional significance for the interpretation of the text in question (Wales 1989: 438). In fact, the growth of stylistics over the last twenty or so years has meant that this definition no longer captures every aspect of stylistics, and part of our aim in this book will be to outline the remit of stylistics as it stands today. For example, during the 1980s interest began to grow in the role of the reader in interpreting texts (see, for example, Alderson and Short 1989 and Short and van Peer 1989), and recently there has been a surge of interest in the cognitive aspects of text comprehension (see Stockwell 2002a and Gavins and Steen 2003). The connection between stylistics and linguistics is that stylistics uses models of language, analytical techniques and methodologies from linguistics to facilitate the study of style in its widest sense. With some notable exceptions (e.g. Crystal and Davy 1969, Enkvist 1973, McIntyre et al. 2004, Jeffries 2007) stylistics has tended to concentrate on the analysis of literary texts, though there is in fact no reason why this should necessarily be the case. In this book we will concentrate our attention on both literary and non-literary texts.

Stylistics has its roots in the formalist school of literary criticism that emerged in Russia in the early years of the twentieth century, though the term ‘style’ goes back to classical rhetoric and poetics. The prime exponents of Russian formalism were Roman Jakobson, Victor Shklovskii and Boris Tomashewskii, and the aims of the movement were to isolate the properties and characteristics of literary language (notice the predilection for literary texts), and to explore how the concept of defamiliarisation1 in both art and literature was at the root of the
intrinsic aesthetic value of the work in question. At the heart of Russian formalism was the belief that the purpose of all art was to defamiliarise the familiar in order to generate for the viewer or reader a new perspective on the topic of the piece of work under consideration.

As a movement, Russian formalism was hugely influential for a large part of the early twentieth century, though its prime tenets were to prove unsustainable (see Simpson 1996: 7–19). The notion that it should be possible to delineate the formal (i.e. linguistic) features which figure in ‘literary’ as opposed to ‘non-literary’ language was eventually shown to be misconstrued. Indeed, as we shall show throughout this book, features of what we might intuitively think of as ‘literary language’ are equally common in non-literary genres, and stylistics nowadays tends to see ‘literariness’ as a point on a cline (see Carter and Nash 1990: 34) rather than as an absolute. Literariness in this sense is not a quality of a text, rather it is a concept belonging to a specific genre. Similarly, the contextual (social and cultural) aspects of what makes a text literary have been increasingly recognised in stylistics as elsewhere. Nevertheless, the impact of Russian formalism on the development of stylistics was of immense importance, and its influence is seen particularly in the psychological concept of foregrounding (see Mukafovsky 1964, Leech 1969: 56–72, van Peer 1980, 1986, Fowler 1986: 71 and Douthwaite 2000), which we will be concerned with in Chapter 2.

The predominance of literary texts as the focus of study within stylistics is reflected in some of the alternative names that stylistics sometimes goes by. These include literary linguistics, critical linguistics, literary semantics, literary pragmatics and poetics, and are mostly an attempt to find a term for the full range of activities practised by modern stylisticians, as well as an attempt to acknowledge that stylistics is not simply concerned with identifying formal features of style in language. The predilection among some stylisticians for the analysis of literature also leads to a number of potentially confusing names for particular approaches to stylistics. These include literary stylistics and linguistic stylistics, and it is worth clarifying here the slight differences in focus of these two approaches. Sometimes, a distinction is made between literary and non-literary stylistics, and such a distinction usually refers to the kind of texts commonly studied. Hence, literary stylistics in this sense is concerned with the analysis of literature whereas non-literary stylistics is concerned with the analysis of non-literary texts. However, where the term literary stylistics is used in contrast to linguistic stylistics, the distinction is not between the kinds of texts studied, but between the objectives behind such analysis. Literary stylistics in this case is concerned with using linguistic techniques to assist in the interpretation of texts, whereas linguistic stylistics is about doing stylistic analysis in order to test or refine a linguistic model (Wales 1989: 438) – in effect, to contribute to linguistic theory. Most stylisticians would argue that what they do is a combination of both of these things, and this is the approach that we take in this book.
1.2 The need for stylistics

Stylistics has a firm place within linguistics, providing theories of language and interpretation which complement context-free theories generated within other areas of language study. Nevertheless, the suggestion that stylistics is concerned with literature more than linguistics is a common criticism from theoretical linguists, though it is countered here by the corpus linguist, John Sinclair, who emphasises the importance of (literary) stylistics for the study of language when he says:

no systematic apparatus can claim to describe a language if it does not embrace the literature also; and not as a freakish development, but as a natural specialization of categories which are required in other parts of the descriptive system. (Sinclair 2004: 51)

The alternative criticism – that stylistics is concerned too much with language and not enough with literary concerns – might characterise the censure of stylistics from a literary direction. Our response to these criticisms is to say that whilst literary texts are, typically, the data upon which stylistic theories are developed, tested and applied, in the same way that, for example, spoken conversation tends to be the data used by sociolinguists, nevertheless, the stylistic features we will discuss in the book are not exclusive to any one genre, and stylistic techniques can be applied equally to non-literary texts. In discussing particular stylistic features we will draw on texts that best exhibit the features under discussion, and we will take examples from both literary and non-literary texts to illustrate analytical techniques. In addition, we will demonstrate that the value of a stylistic approach, whether from a literary or a non-literary viewpoint, is the precision and detail with which we can describe the textual effects of literature, whether our focus is the text itself, the reader’s contribution or even some notion of authorial meaning. Stylistics has no settled view of the relationship between author, text and reader, but constantly evolves new theories and models of this dynamic relationship, in order to elucidate ever more clearly the processes by which meaning comes about.

Stylistics draws upon theories and models from other fields more frequently than it develops its own unique theories. This is because it is at a point of confluence of many sub-disciplines of linguistics, and other disciplines, such as literary studies and psychology, drawing upon these (sub-)disciplines but not seeking to duplicate or replace them. This versatility of approach and open-mindedness are, of course, characteristic of the humanities in general. Instead, it takes a particular view of the process of communication which places the text at the centre of its concerns, whilst being interested in the relationship between writer and text, and reader and text, as well as the wider contexts of production and reception of texts.
So, as well as drawing upon the descriptive apparatus of context-free linguistics, such as the formal descriptions supplied by structuralists, generativists and other twentieth-century linguistic movements, stylistics also takes into account the concerns of pragmatics on the one hand and sociolinguistics on the other, though these latter two sub-disciplines of linguistics have tended to be more interested in spoken than written language whereas stylistics has traditionally been concerned more with written than spoken texts. In other ways, stylistics also shares boundaries with cognitivist approaches to language, and, increasingly, with corpus linguistics. If what is described in the remainder of this book at times sounds rather similar to pragmatic, sociolinguistic, cognitive or corpus-linguistic accounts of language phenomena, this will be no more than we expect, as stylistics shares many concerns and theories of language and meaning with these fields, sometimes with only slight differences of emphasis. (For readers new to the terminology in this paragraph, we would reassure you that such terms as are needed to understand this book will be introduced and explained as they arise.)

In general terms, then, we have claimed that we need stylistics to provide an angle on language study which places the text at the centre of its concern. But what, in particular, might we expect stylistics to provide in relation to individual texts?

1.2.1 Literary explanations

The first and driving impulse of stylistics was to use the growing field of linguistics to explicate the textual effects that literary scholars may have agreed upon, but had neither the terminology to explain nor in many cases the wish to do so, being interested instead in other approaches to the study of literature which were less concerned with the language and more with the ideas encompassed by literary texts. Though some aspects of classical rhetoric could still be used to analyse the language of literature, this tended to be less appropriate to use with contemporary writing, whose authors were not trained in classical rhetoric and whose goal in writing works of fiction and poetry was not self-consciously rhetorical. Rhetorical analysis also worked at a more general level than the emerging linguistic analysis, the latter suggesting that it would become possible to explain in more detail the workings of the literary text and its rhetorical or other effects. Thus, for the first time, there was the opportunity to explain linguistically a range of literary features including the musical effects in poetry and the narrative complexities of modernist novels.

We will demonstrate the stylistic analysis of such different text-types throughout the rest of the book, but for now, let us consider one illustrative example of how linguistics might inform literary analysis. A principle that all stylisticians subscribe to is that meaning in language comes about through the linguistic
choices that a writer makes (either consciously or unconsciously). The following short extract from James Fenton’s poem ‘A German Requiem’ illustrates this:

(1) How comforting it is, once or twice a year,  
To get together and forget the old times.  
(‘A German Requiem’, Fenton 1980)

The second line of this extract stands out because of Fenton’s use of the verb ‘forget’, which seems unusual in this context. Prototypically, we might expect ‘remember’ in its place. This is because the phrase ‘old times’ has a positive semantic prosody – that is, it collocates most often with positive concepts. We will discuss the concepts of collocation and semantic prosody in Chapter 7, but briefly, collocation refers to the fact that particular words frequently occur within close proximity to a restricted set of words, and semantic prosody refers to the meanings that delexicalised (i.e. relatively ‘empty’) words take on as a result of collocational patterns. Since ‘old times’ has a positive semantic prosody, it therefore seems appropriate for people to want to get together and remember rather than forget them. Moreover, ‘forgetting’ is not normally considered to be a conscious act, so it is odd to imagine a situation where a group of people would gather together in order to collectively and actively forget something – on the face of it a logical impossibility. We might describe the verb, technically, as changing its transitivity pattern, being used to describe an intentional action instead of an unintentional one, or supervention. (Transitivity will also be discussed more fully in Chapter 3.)

The word ‘forget’, then, is foregrounded – it stands out as not being what we would normally expect. Fenton is essentially playing with our preconceptions and the effect is to focus our attention on the absurdity of actively trying to forget something – an action which takes on a much greater significance when we realise that ‘A German Requiem’ is a poem about post-war Germany and its efforts to come to terms with its immediate past. The surface-level interpretation here is something that would no doubt be picked up on by a careful ‘literary’ reading, but the linguistic detail added by a stylistic analysis enables us to see more clearly where the literary effect is coming from.

Further evidence of how a linguistic approach can explicate an interpretation of a literary text can be seen if we consider Fowler’s (1977) notion of mind style. Basically, mind style refers to the idiosyncratic world view of a character or narrator, exhibited through the linguistic structure of a text. Leech and Short (1981, 2007) explain the concept through an extract from Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury. The narrator of the extract below is Benjy, a young man with the mental age of a child, whose unusual view of the world is reflected through the linguistic choices he makes when describing the game of golf he is watching:
(2) Through the fence between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting. They were coming toward where the flag was and I went along the fence. Luster was hunting in the grass by the flower tree. They took the flag out, and they were hitting. Then they put the flag back and they went to the table, and he hit and the other hit. (Faulkner 1987: 3)

We can notice, for example, that Benjy does not use any of the lexical items associated with the game of golf; for instance, he uses *table* rather than *tee*. Furthermore, he uses the transitive verb *hit*, which we would normally expect to have an object, as though it is intransitive and does not need an object. This, according to Leech and Short (2007: 166), reflects Benjy’s lack of understanding of the concept of cause and effect. The hitting that he witnesses is, for him, to no purpose; there is, literally, no object to the men’s activity.

The reasons why such explanations of literary effects appealed to early stylisticians were various. It meant that some attention could be given to the question of whether ‘literariness’ was indeed a linguistic phenomenon, and to what extent features that were to be found in poetry were also to be found in other texts, such as advertisements, sermons, speeches of all kinds and so on. For example, foregrounding, of the sort described in example 1, can also be found in adverts and other kinds of non-literary writing. Example 3 is from a retirement announcement in a Huddersfield University staff newsletter. The final word has been blanked out here, and it is probably fair to say that most people, if asked, would guess that this last word is likely to be ‘family’ or ‘children’ or such like.

(3) Stephen intends to spend more time with his wife and __________.

The reason that most people would choose a noun relating to family members to fit the blank slot in example 3 is again because of common collocational patterns. There is a restricted set of words that we would normally expect to follow ‘wife and’. In actual fact, the word in the original announcement was ‘caravan’, giving rise to a humorous effect, largely because the word ‘caravan’ is foregrounded as a result of not conforming to our expectations for this frame. This deviant collocation appears to put ‘caravan’ on a par with children and other family members, leading us to make inferences about the sort of person who would care as much for a caravan as for members of his family (depending on the cultural schemata of the reader, the word ‘caravan’ may also be imbued with certain negative connotations, perhaps deriving from long-remembered childhood holidays . . .). It turns out, then, that the kinds of features common to literary texts turn up just as much in non-literary texts too, though one thing we have not done here is to consider the literary merit or value of such language use. Such questions of aesthetics have normally not been the main concern of stylisticians, but it is not completely unknown for linguistic definitions of literary value to be debated too (see, for example van Peer *et al.* in press).
1.2 The need for stylistics

Much recent work in literary stylistics has been concerned with the reader’s role in the creation of textual meaning, and this has led to an explosion of cognitive approaches which have taken the view that stylistics can help to explain the ways in which readers put together a meaning from a text. Some of these approaches have contributed to our understanding of how readers conceptualise the world described by a literary text, and this has led to the development of text world theory (described fully in Chapter 6) into a rich account of this process of imagining hypothetical situations and events in reaction to textual triggers. Hoover (2004a), for example, shows how changing just one or two of the words in a piece of writing can radically affect our interpretation of that text. In example 4, the words Mr and Miss are the only additions to this extract from William Golding’s novel about prehistoric man, The Inheritors:

(4) Mr Lok was running as fast as he could. His head was down and he carried his thorn bush horizontally for balance and smacked the drifts of vivid buds aside with his free hand. Miss Liku rode him, laughing . . .

(Hoover 2004a: 102)

Hoover makes the point that adding these honorifics to the text greatly restricts the way in which the reader can form an image of the text world. Mr and Miss are titles which have no place in a prehistoric world, and their presence in the text therefore prevents the reader from generating the kind of text world that is triggered in the original text. Instead, Hoover suggests, the titles are likely to trigger the reader to generate an image of a foreign or colonial fictional world (note that this is especially likely if the reader has a Western European background). The full account of text world creation that stylistics can provide is a further indication of the value of stylistics for contributing to our understanding of how readers make sense of texts.

Other stylistic approaches which take a cognitive view have included the use of schema theory (from psychology) to explain certain kinds of responses to literary (and other) works. Some researchers (e.g. Cook 1994) have claimed that one of the distinctive features of literary works relates to the effect that they have on the perceptions of the reader. To the extent that they change the reader’s ‘schemata’ – or standard ways of understanding the world – they are more or less ‘literary’ in effect. This viewpoint has been debated (see, for example, Jeffries 2001 and Semino 2001), but it points to one of the useful and productive features of stylistic study, which is the ability to advance thinking about literary value as well as processes of reading and negotiating meaning.

1.2.2 Language, rhetoric and power

The explanatory power of stylistics can also help us to understand in more depth the ways in which the style of texts can help to influence the perceptions of readers in more everyday situations, such as listening to political
speeches, responding to advertisements and so on. One example, from a teenage magazine (Jump), is discussed in Jeffries (2007b):

(5) Nor am I the kind of guy who only goes for earthy types (you know, girls who prefer eco-terrorism to experiencing life and refuse to, like, shave and stuff). (quoted in Jeffries 2007b: 113)

Here, the writer of the article manages to create a ‘new’ semantic opposition which is a more specific version of the superordinate opposition between normal and abnormal, ubiquitous in such magazines and likely to have a strong influence on the young girls who read them. Jeffries comments on the structure which makes this ideology possible:

This distancing from abnormality is achieved by the negation of a case which is pumped up by a hyperbolic and negative description of earthy types. The constructed opposite of the normal male (who doesn’t like such women) and the abnormal male who does is compounded by the constructed opposition between experiencing life and eco-terrorism, the latter in some sense being a lack of living in the terms of this writer. (Jeffries 2007b: 114)

Stylistics has evolved a detailed linguistic account of the kinds of persuasive techniques which are more generally covered by classical rhetoric. The use of stylistics for these purposes enables scholars to approach the explicitly persuasive aspects of style as linguistic phenomena, with the similarities between these rhetorical techniques and literary style also constituting comparative data for each other, since the tools available for the analysis of both these effects are essentially the same.

In addition to providing a more technical account, then, of persuasive textual features, stylistics, aided by insights from other fields such as pragmatics and discourse analysis, may also provide us with an account of the more implicitly manipulative uses of language. The development of critical discourse analysis, though not a product of stylistics alone, can nevertheless be seen as one of the sub-disciplines that has a family resemblance to stylistics, particularly in its positioning of the text at the centre of its concerns. This field is concerned with how the texts that surround us may subtly and sometimes even deliberately influence our political, social and even consumerist outlooks. For instance, Fairclough (1992), in an analysis of an extract from a university prospectus, shows how the language of the text constructs students as consumers and higher education as a commodity to be advertised in the same way as any other marketable product. In relation to his chosen text, he makes the point that the phrase ‘You will need’, which precedes a graphical representation of the university’s entry requirements, shifts the emphasis away from the university as an authoritative gatekeeper, and instead constructs the student as a powerful consumer rather than a powerless applicant. This shift in emphasis is also realised through the university’s entry requirements being outlined in a graphic, which, according to Fairclough, marginalises the entry conditions so that they are ‘construed as matter
of fact which no-one is responsible for’ (Fairclough 1992: 214). Thus, the linguistic structure of Fairclough’s example text reflects the increasing ‘marketisation’ of higher education.

The ‘exposing’ of such potentially insidious uses of language has been one of the most radical uses of the techniques of stylistic and critical discourse analysis, though it is instructive to see that it is at the level of interpretation, in context, that these more political considerations enter the discussion. The analytical techniques, varied as they are, are all available to the stylistician (see, for example, Simpson’s 1993 use of CDA techniques for literary analysis), whatever the main purpose of the research project in question.

In summary, then, we need stylistics because much of our lives is negotiated through language, and though this language is well-described in structural terms by descriptive linguistics, and in contextual terms by such disciplines as discourse analysis and pragmatics, there remain insights about textual meaning that are addressed more effectively by a discipline which arose from literary studies, took on the apparatus of linguistics, and with the text at its core, became a powerful discipline in its own right. How, for instance, do we understand the hypothetical world in a sci-fi novel? Why does a particular line of poetry seem to move not only one reader, but a number of readers? Is there something subtly persuasive about Tony Blair’s speeches, and how do insurance companies attract (and keep) our attention? All of these questions can be addressed through stylistic analysis.

1.3 The scope of stylistics

This section will introduce some of the parameters of stylistics which define its scope. In some cases, the topics explored here will be discussed in more detail later in the book. The following sub-sections, therefore, will delineate the boundaries of stylistics with reference to the kind of texts that it studies, the theories that it draws upon and the methodologies that are available to those working in this field.

1.3.1 Range of texts

In section 1.1 we made a distinction between literary and non-literary texts, both of which are studied by stylisticians. Though the origins of stylistics are in the literary field, and many stylisticians even today consider literature their field of study, it rapidly became clear that the techniques of analysis being developed in this hybrid discipline were as applicable to non-literary texts as to literary ones.

There is, therefore, in principle, no restriction whatsoever on the kinds of text that may be subjected to stylistic analysis. However, there are both historical and also practical reasons why there has been more emphasis on the literary aspects of
style in the past, and also on the written language in preference to the spoken. Now that recording techniques have made the capture and transcription of spoken texts more accessible, we may find that stylistics concerns itself with the full range of linguistic usage. Certainly, there have been recent examples of stylisticians turning their hand to look at the language of spoken conversation (McIntyre et al. 2004), advertisements (Short and Wen Zhong 1997, Jeffries 2007b), humour (Simpson 2004) and film (Simpson and Montgomery 1995).

This latter development in the direction of multimodality, of course, is not restricted to stylistics, but is also reflected in the move from literary theory to ‘cultural theory’ and the increasing interest that all such commentators are taking in not only linguistic, but also visual communication of all kinds.

1.3.2 Range of theories

Stylistics, as we shall see throughout this book, is eclectic in its use of theory, though it originated in literary theories of formalism and took on the theory of structuralism as developed by Saussure (1959 [1916]) in the early twentieth century. What these theories together provided was the descriptive apparatus (such as grammatical and lexical terminology and categories) which would enable scholars to pinpoint the precise techniques of construction that writers were using in order to demonstrate the linguistic basis of well-known literary effects, particularly those which were foregrounded. The focus on the actual language of the text which is epitomised by these theories is still present in some stylistic practice, and demonstrates that stylistics does not originate from an author-based view of textual meaning in the same way that, for example, some areas of literary studies did.

In time, stylistics responded to the developing of new theories of language, based more on contextual factors in the case of pragmatics and discourse analysis and on cognitive factors in the case of generative grammar and cognitive linguistics. With the ever-present aim of explaining textual meaning and effects, it was able to use the insights provided by all of these theories to support new analytical processes and provide new insights into the style of texts and their reception by a range of potential audiences. Thus, there are now stylisticians working alongside psychologists (see, for example, Sanford et al. 2004 and Schram and Steen 2001) to establish some of the processes by which readers respond to linguistic style. There are stylisticians working in critical discourse analysis (e.g. Fowler 1991, Mullaney 2004), with theories of social exploitation and manipulation at the heart of their approach. There are also those working with computational and statistical theories (e.g. Culpeper 2002, Hoover 2004b), who draw literary and linguistic conclusions from the computer analysis of large quantities of data.

A recent set of developments in cognitive stylistics have also drawn on theories that are seen by some as beyond the scope of linguistics, such as psychology and philosophy, but have provided useful insights and models for analysing what is going on in the processing of texts by readers. These theories include schema