

## Linguistics and English Literature

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### An Introduction

Concise and engaging, this textbook introduces stylistics, the application of linguistics to literary analysis. Assuming no prior knowledge of linguistics, H. D. Adamson discusses linguistics before addressing its application to literature, enabling students to become knowledgeable in both fields. Targeted specifically at undergraduate literature students, the book covers a wide range of topics in linguistics and literary criticism, as well as a variety of literary genres and popular culture, from poems and contemporary literature to comic book art and advertising. Providing numerous examples throughout, linguistic concepts are clearly and accessibly presented in an easy-to-digest way, accompanied by numerous examples and a Glossary of key terms. Each chapter features exercises, inviting students to apply specific linguistic knowledge to the analysis of literary texts, as well as further reading suggestions, figures and tables, and highlighted key terms. Supplementary online resources include additional exercises, further reading suggestions, useful links, discussion questions, key term flashcards, and an answer booklet for instructors.

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## An Introduction

H. D. Adamson  
*University of Arizona*



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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom  
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi - 110025, India  
103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107045408](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107045408)

DOI: 10.1017/9781107051379

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First published 2019

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data*

Names: Adamson, H. D., author.

Title: Linguistics and English literature : an introduction / H. D. Adamson, University of Arizona.

Description: Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, N.Y. : Cambridge University Press, 2018. | Series: Cambridge Introductions to the English Language | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018035158 | ISBN 9781107045408 (hardback) | ISBN 9781107623057 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Language and languages--Style--Textbooks. |

BISAC: LANGUAGE ARTS & DISCIPLINES / Linguistics / General.

Classification: LCC P301 .A325 2018 | DDC 808--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018035158>

ISBN 978-1-107-04540-8 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-62305-7 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
978-1-107-04540-8 — Linguistics and English Literature: An Introduction  
H. D. Adamson  
Frontmatter  
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*I dedicate this book to the memory of my parents, Margaret Boyle  
Adamson and Jack Hale Adamson.*

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## Preface

Students of literature who would like to deepen their knowledge of the English language and also to learn how ideas from the field of linguistics can contribute to understanding literature are the audience for this book. Linguistics is a broad field that includes everything from the analysis of sound waves to theories of political power, and scholars have used insights from all of these specialties to enhance our understanding and appreciation of literature. The very old partnership between the study of language and the study of literature is nowadays called *stylistics*. I have chosen to focus on stylistic analyses that are based mainly on the central areas of linguistic scholarship, areas that are usually covered in an introductory linguistics textbook, including phonology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and discourse analysis. However, I have also included two more recent areas of scholarship that are particularly relevant to literature, namely metaphor and metonymy (Chapter 3), and the analysis of visual images (Chapter 9).

In order to do stylistic criticism, you must first know the relevant linguistics, and most of the chapters in the book first teach the required linguistics and then apply that knowledge to literary analysis. Therefore, the book is self-contained: you don't have to know any linguistics to use it, and you don't have to buy a supplementary linguistics text. I have not limited the linguistics discussions in the book to material that is directly relevant to analyzing literature. Rather, I have included areas of language study that are important for understanding how language works in general, and which are interesting in their own right.

## Teaching Linguistics and Teaching Literature

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Teaching linguistics and teaching literature are the same but different, and to explain why, I would like to take a brief detour

## Preface

into the field of education. Two very different approaches to teaching have been influential in American education. The *instructional approach* was nearly universal in the nineteenth century and is still widespread. The typical instructional classroom features a teacher standing at the front lecturing to students. Freire (1973) has characterized this approach with a banking metaphor, where the students' minds are like empty bank accounts in which the teacher makes deposits of knowledge. This approach is common in literature courses that cover the different historical periods, Victorian, Romantic, Modern, etc., where students might learn a bit about the lives of the authors and the cultural circumstances in which they wrote. In the instructional approach, the teacher is the center of the classroom and the source of knowledge, who states the relevant information and models the desired critical skills.

The instructional approach was challenged by the progressive education movement in the 1920s. The progressive approach was inspired by Rousseau's novel *Emile*, the story of a child who learns in a free and natural way, guided only by her own interests and curiosity. John Dewey was the father of progressive education in the United States, and his ideas have survived remarkably well. Dewey argued for student-centered teaching. He believed that students should follow an internal syllabus based on their own interests and developing abilities, and that schooling should be relevant to their everyday lives. Each of these beliefs has a corollary. The first is that instruction should begin with what the student already knows, and the second is that instruction should be interesting and fun.

The literature class seems custom-made for putting the progressive teaching philosophy into practice, and many activities have been developed for teaching literature according to Dewey's principles. I have tried to incorporate some of these activities into my linguistics and literature classes over the years. For example, I have used Hess's (2006) suggestion to help students make autobiographical or intertextual connections with a reading by asking them to infer information about a character the way we sometimes infer information about an acquaintance. This technique can be used, for example, to teach Adrienne Rich's poem "Letters in the Family" (Chapter 6), which contains a letter from a young woman named Nicole to her parents. Nicole has left an unhappy home to join the Republican cause fighting the Fascists in the Spanish Civil War. Hess suggests that students try to relate Nicole's situation to their own lives by answering questions like these:

Who is Nicole? What kind of person is she? Why do you think she has left home? What kind of relationship does Nicole have with her parents? Does anything about this relationship remind you of anything in your own life or of anything else you have read about?

Hess also suggests using role-playing to put students “into the story.” As an exercise for “Letters in the Family,” for example, students could be asked to write a reply to Nicole (not necessarily in verse) from her mother or father, expressing their point of view.

Another technique for relating a text to students’ lives and beliefs is to select a sentence or short passage from a work of literature that presents a controversial or thought-provoking idea and ask the students to react to it, perhaps first in writing (including free-writing in class) and then orally. Here are some examples of such passages that might be used in this way to prepare the students to read the whole text.

1. Some say the world will end in fire,  
Some say in ice.  
Robert Frost, “Fire and Ice”

(from Chapter 1)

2. (This passage describes dropouts from society during the 1960s.)  
R-r-rackety-am-m. *Am.* War, rhyme,  
Soap, meat, marriage, the Phantom Jet  
Are shit, and like that.  
Mona Van Duyn, “What the Motorcycle Said”

(from Chapter 2)

3. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished  
work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced.  
Abraham Lincoln, *The Gettysburg Address*

(from Chapter 3)

Beach et al. (2011) suggest another role-playing activity in which students critique a work from the perspectives of different critical schools, such as Marxist or reader-response, or as they put it, through different “lenses.” Some examples of this kind of exercise are provided in Chapter 1. The critical lens adopted throughout this book is, of course, that of stylistics, but it can be interesting to ask students to interpret one of the works discussed in the text through a different lens that they may have encountered in their other literature classes. Here are some questions that Beach et al. suggest:

1. Summarize what you think it means to apply a Marxist lens to a text.
2. Underline lines that are particularly relevant to a Marxist reading.
3. Based on a Marxist reading briefly explain the meaning of the poem.
4. What larger questions about society does this text raise for you?

## Preface

In doing these kinds of exercises (as well as in doing exercises through the stylistics lens), it is well to keep in mind this observation by Francine Prose (2014), “When [critical] categories get less interesting is when the category becomes the whole point – the substance and basis of how a book is read.”

I have gone on at length about the progressive approach to teaching literature because although I recommend using it in moderation for teaching some of the material in this book, I have not often incorporated it into the exercises, most of which reflect an instructional approach. The main reason for this decision is that I have found that the instructional approach to teaching *linguistics* usually works best. Although it is possible to relate linguistic notions to students’ lives (for example, the difference between formal and informal styles can be taught by asking students to record a friend telling a story and then counting the percentage at which the informant uses a particular informal marker, such as “dropping the g”). However, this kind of learning is not very efficient, and I have found that college students can become impatient when asked to figure out well-known principles for themselves. So, it is usually more effective to teach linguistics through lecture/discussions. And, of course, it is also true that when teaching technical material like the phonemic alphabet or how to parse a sentence the teacher is, in fact, the expert and the students are the learners.

So, that’s what I have found to be different about teaching linguistics and teaching literature. What’s the same is that both the instructional and progressive approaches recognize that real learning involves hands-on doing. Courses in chemistry and biology, for example, center on the teacher, but they also require the students to spend a lot of time in the lab showing that they can apply the principles and techniques that were presented in the lecture. This is also true in teaching linguistics, where students can only master material like the phonemic alphabet by using it. Hands-on instruction was also a principle of Dewey’s philosophy. He wrote:

When education fails to recognize that the primary or initial subject matter always exists as a matter of active doing, . . . the subject matter of instruction . . . becomes just something to be memorized and reproduced upon demand (1916:184).

Learning to do linguistics and learning to critique literature both require a lot of practice. This is what the exercises at the end of each chapter provide, and so they should be considered as important as the expository portions of the text. Although these exercises are mostly instructional, many requiring a single right answer, they are in my opinion the only way that students can master technical linguistic material and also develop the ability to apply their knowledge to interpreting literature. However, I also encourage the use of more progressive exercises, such as those I have suggested, to increase

the students' interest and enjoyment of the texts. More such activities can be found in the chapter References.

I have found that the material in this text can be covered in a 14-week undergraduate course that proceeds at all deliberate speed. If the instructor wishes to take a more leisurely pace, some of the chapters can be omitted or just touched on briefly. These less central chapters include Chapter 1, Introduction, whose material students may already be familiar with, and Chapter 5, The Rhythms of Speech and Poetry. If Chapter 5 is omitted, the students might be asked to view the PowerPoint presentation in the web materials, which summarizes the chapter. Chapter 7, Morphology, Semantics, and Pragmatics, and Chapter 9, Alternative Texts, are also less central to the book, but Chapter 9 is usually the students' favorite.

Let me end with a remark made by the great Russian linguist Roman Jakobson, who throughout his career urged a collaboration between linguistics and literary study. Jakobson said, "A linguist deaf to the poetic function of language and a literary scholar . . . unconvertant with linguistic methods are equally flagrant anachronisms." I hope that this book may contribute in its own way to this collaboration.

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## Acknowledgments

I am indebted to friends and colleagues in the Department of English at the University of Arizona with whom I have spent many enjoyable hours discussing literature and linguistics. In particular I would like to thank Roger Bowen, Charlie Scruggs, and Tom Willard, who read and commented on parts of the manuscript. Former Department Heads Rudy Troike and Jun Liu provided a collegial and productive environment for both linguists and literary scholars. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Linda Waugh, whose critique of many of the chapters was insightful and supportive. I would also like to thank Dr. David Adamson, poet and editor extraordinaire, who offered valuable advice and encouragement at a time when I needed it badly. Thanks to *New York Times* best-selling author (and my son-in-law) Adam Rex for help with graphics and understanding comics, and to my research assistant Lauren Harvey for many helpful comments. Special thanks as well to Helen Barton, my Cambridge University Press editor, for cheerfully bearing with me throughout this long project.

My greatest debt is to my family, Alice, Katie, Josh, Jack, Marie, Adam, and Henry, who continue to provide love, companionship, humor, and intelligence.