

PROBLEMS OF DESCRIPTION OF STYLE OF TEXTS BY NIGERIAN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

ADEGOKE Tajudeen, J. Ph.D.
and
AKAMO O. Princewill, Ph.D.

Abstract

This study investigated the problems of describing the style of texts by Nigerian undergraduate students. The responses of about 400 students to an examination question on linguistic stylistics constitute the data of the study. The responses reveal that students substitute the method of literary appreciation for stylistic description. Among the problems identified are: (i) shallow knowledge of linguistic and stylistic categories used in style description/interpretation (ii) gross incompetence in the use of English (iii) poor knowledge of Grammar of English. The study therefore concludes that for any meaningful stylistic analysis to be carried out by the Nigerian undergraduates, the students must learn the linguistic and stylistic categories used in stylistic analysis. They must also be well-groomed in English grammar. The students must be exposed to the fundamentals of stylistics at the upper secondary schools.

Keywords: Stylistics, literary criticism, literary appreciation, description, linguistic and stylistics categories

Introduction

Literary criticism is a discipline that is concerned with defining, classifying, analysing, interpreting and evaluating by means of certain principles of enquiry which characterize it. Friedrich (1989) in Akorede (2008:8) describes literary criticism as a reconstructive process where a critic enhances the development of art. He sees criticism as a distinct discipline which depends on literary text. Literary criticism is a discipline which employs mainly literary tools in explicating a text.

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Stylistics, according to Widdowson (1975:3) 'is the study of literary discourse from linguistic orientation'. In other words, it is the interpretation of a literary discourse by means of the consideration of significant linguistic features identified in the text. The employment of linguistic categories for literary text interpretation has been criticized by literary critics who believe that linguists merely elaborate on forms at the expense of the message and values of the text. Though stylistics is described as the study of a literary work from the perspective of linguistics, nonetheless, such study must relate the language in the discourse to its artistic function. Therefore, it will be right to assert that any linguistic study of a literary work that does not relate the linguistic cues to the message is not a linguistic stylistic exercise but a mere exercise in linguistic description similar to text-linguistics approach. Of course, a linguistic stylistic analysis of a text does not employ the use of linguistic evidences alone but also takes into consideration significant literary cues before arriving at the meaning of the text.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following questions:

1. What are the characteristic problems Nigerian undergraduate students of English exhibit when asked to describe the style of a text?
2. To what extent do students confuse literary appreciation with linguistic stylistic analysis?
3. What linguistic and stylistic categories do students fail to apply correctly?
4. What pedagogical interventions can address these problems?

Pedagogical Influences on Students' Responses

Pedagogical context contributes greatly in shaping students' analytical behaviour. In many Nigerian Universities, literature

teaching traditionally emphasizes thematic interpretation and moral evaluation. As a result, teaching methods strongly condition what students look out for in a text. Under traditional approaches, students are trained to extract themes encouraged to make moral judgement and pay less attention to how language creates meaning. Ronald, C (1997:5-9) emphasizes that without explicit language awareness training, learners/students are unlikely to notice the linguistic patterning that stylistics requires.

Relevance of Linguistics in Descriptive Interpretation

The traditional critics i.e. literary critics opposed strongly the incursion of linguists into literary text interpretation. Perhaps in their efforts to jealously guard what they consider their territory from intrusion by the linguists lashed out at them. For instance, Lodge David (1966) says he cannot see linguistics offering more to literary studies beyond 'a new vocabulary, a new jargon...' In other words, what linguistics does is to contribute mainly new technical jargons and that it does not deepen literary interpretation. Also, another critic Bateson (1971:75-79) has this to say of linguists: ...all that we get is theorizing and some skillful linguistic propaganda.

Some linguists had ab-initio made comments intended to justify the relevance of linguistics in criticism. The following statement of Whitehall (1951:73) attempts to assert the importance of linguistics in criticism as he argues that: '...as no science can go beyond mathematics, no criticism can go beyond its linguistics'. Also, Freeman (1964:2) supports the view of Whitehall when Freeman maintains that:

Linguistics gives literary criticism a theoretical underpinning as necessary to that undertaking as Mathematics is to Physics; a good critic is perforce a good linguist.

And according to Fowler (1966:158), what the traditional critics offer is a 'set of attitudes which are a reinforcement of, not substitutes for those of descriptive criticism'. However, some scholars believe these uncomplimentary statements from scholars/practitioners of this two divide is unwarranted and unnecessary as they believe the two disciplines (linguistic criticism) and literary criticism complement each other. This sentiment can be seen in the statement of Widdowson (1975:1) when he says:

I believe that linguistics does have something to contribute to literary criticism, just as literary criticism has something to contribute to linguistics

The complementary nature of the two disciplines is further emphasized by Jakobson cited in Sebeok (1960:377) when he says:

... a linguist deaf to the poetic function of language and a literary scholar indifferent to linguistic problems are flagrant anachronisms.

Renowned linguists such as Leech & Short have since demonstrated that the two disciplines, though different in approach, complement each other. This is evident in analyzing style and meaning in a passage from *The Great Gatsby* by Short (1996:335-339). Short explores significant linguistic features such as the lexis (especially the nouns and adjectives and to certain extent the verbs) and sentence structures for description. He relates the sentence length to the meaning of the passage. Though the passage is a prose, Short describes the poetic feature such as repetition of certain sounds as seen in the first two sentences which contain a number of alliterative

patterns based on word initial /k/ and /g/, which emphasize the copiousness and glamour of the party as illustrated in: corps of caterers. christmas tress of Gatsby's enormous garden ... garnished with glistening hors doeuvres.

Also, Leech in his article (Freeman 1970:120) demonstrates that linguistic criticism and literary interpretation are distinct but complementary ways of explaining literary text. In analyzing Thomas' **This Bread I Break**, Leech dwells on the concepts of cohesion. collocation, foregrounding, and context

The Problems of Explicating a text/passage stylistically by Nigerian undergraduate students of English.

Stylistic analysis can be done by means of considering the linguistic and literary criteria found in such a text or literary piece. However, responses to stylistic analysis by Nigerian Undergraduates have shown that the students often use literary yardsticks for their purported linguistic description. The major issue is the inability of the students to distinguish between interpreting literary appreciation and evidence-based linguistic description. Those who attempt stylistic analysis using linguistic and stylistic tools come up with nebulous and superfluous descriptions. Admittedly, there is not one definitive interpretation that can be given to a literary piece, yet whatever linguistic criticism that is carried out should be clear, logical and verifiable to the reader(s).

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive survey design with qualitative content analysis of students' examination scripts.

Participants

The participants were 400 undergraduate students of English at Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo who registered for the course "Language of Prose" in a Rain Semester examination. The large class size necessitated purposive sampling: 120 scripts were initially screened, and four scripts (labeled Candidates A, B, C, D) were selected as representative of the dominant response patterns (literary appreciation, superficial linguistic description, and mixed approaches).

Instrument

The instrument was an examination question requiring students to analyze the structural and lexical characteristics of 1 Corinthians 13 (the biblical passage on love) and relate their findings to the theme of love. The passage was chosen because it contains rich linguistic features (archaic lexis, repetitive syntactic structures, cohesive devices) suitable for stylistic analysis.

Data Collection Procedure

Students' handwritten responses were collected after the examination. The researchers anonymized the scripts and transcribed the responses verbatim, preserving original errors.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed two stages. First, student responses were categorized according to error types: (a) confusion of literary appreciation with stylistic analysis, (b) misuse of stylistic terminology (e.g., foregrounding), (c) superficial or incorrect linguistic descriptions. Second, the authors conducted a model stylistic analysis of the same passage using the lexical and grammatical categories proposed by Leech and Short (1981) to serve as a benchmark.

Question: Analyse the structural and lexical characteristics of the text below and relate what you discover to the theme of love.

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding bronze, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge: and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profiteth me nothing. Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up. Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not its own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Love never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall be done away; whether there be tongues they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now, we see in a mirror, darkly: but then, face to face; and I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abide faith, hope, love, these three, but the greatest of these is love. **(I Corinthians 13).**

The data are selected sample responses from the students named as candidates A, B, C, and D for confidentiality. Below are the unedited responses to the question.

Candidate A's Analysis

The text is written in a paragraph. This is used by the writer to portray the fact that only an idea or content is been discussed (sic). There is also the use of forerounding by the writer for the sake of emphasis

e.g. "suffereth and rejoiceth" are underlined. Also Corinthians 13) appears boldly than others referring us to the extract of the passage.

Syntactic level

There are 11 sentences and they focus on LOVE (sic). The domineering sentence type is complex sentence.

Phonological level

The passage is spoken which brings about the use of lexical structure. There is the use of rhythm. For instance, suffereth, envieth, vaunteth etc

Candidate B's Analysis

Field of the Extract as we could see, the extract belongs to religion. The Aspect of the Field: Christian religion. Subject Matter Being **Discussed:** Indispensable aspect of love in Christianity.

Theme of love: This theme dominates this extract from the beginning to the end. From sentence one, we have "Though I speak with tongues of men and angels and have not love, I am become a sounding bronze," then down to the last sentence.

Graphology:

Paragraphing: Everything is written in just one paragraph to project the theme of love.

Morphology

Word Formation: Some words are prominently employed by the writer, e.g., 'suffereth', 'Doth', 'rejoiceth', 'beareth', 'hopeth', 'endureth', etc. By these words, we understand the period and setting of the passage.

Candidate C's Analysis

There are a lot of figurative expressions that have contributed to the theme. Such figures of speech, which could be deduced from the passage, include:

- (a) simile
- (b) metaphor
- (c) personification
- (d) hyperbole

The use of simile could be deduced in the passage whereby the writer makes some indirect comparison. This is evident in the passage where the writer says.

... I am become as sounding bronze or tinkling cymbal

... When I was a child, I spoke as a child.

There is the use of comparison in the above statements.

The use of metaphorical statement is evident in direct comparison.

Hyperbolic expression used in the text include ... and understand all mysteries ... I have all... I have all faith so that I could move all mountains and have not love I am nothing."

The above expressions are full of exaggeration. Personification is another device used by the writer to buttress the theme of love e.g "love suffereth long and is kind". "Love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself... but rejoiceth in the truth."

In the above expressions human attribute are given to love

Oxymoron: The writer also makes use of oxymoron:

"... For now, we see in a mirror, darkly; but then face to face..."

Structural Analysis

The writer also makes use of cohesion. The major cohesion used in the passage is "though" though I speak with ... " ... And though I..."

Candidate D's Analysis

- * Analysis
- Field- love
- Aspect -

Subject matter - It is an indication that without love, life is empty and meaningless to mankind.

Graphology

- i. **Foregrounding:** There are no foregrounding words in the passage.
- ii. **Spacing:** There are Spaces between each word in the passage or text of the passage.
- iii. **Paragraphing:** The structure of words in the passage are in one paragraph as they are not indented.
- iv. **Punctuation:** It is a series of: symbols used to mark off words, phrases, clauses and sentences from one another.

Grammatical Level

The structure and grammar of the passage is archaic and as we have words like "suffereth, doth, envieth, rejoiceth, falleth, believeth, profiteth" etc.

Morphological Level

The use of coinages that is invention of new words e.g. "doth, suffereth, failleth, rejoiceth" etc to emphasise the theme of love.

From the responses of the candidates, we note that:

- i. the candidates do not have good grasp of stylistic analysis. For instance, candidate A refers to (I Corinthians 13) as an example of foregrounding for the reason that it is boldly put in brackets hence indicating that the candidate does not understand what foregrounding means at all. This lack of knowledge of foregrounding is also observed in the conclusion of candidate 'D' who says there is no foregrounding in the passage.
- ii. though some candidates attempted to describe linguistic features such as morphology, phonology, graphology and syntax that characterize the passage; however, a close scrutiny of these descriptions shows they are superficial descriptions. For instance, candidate A has this to say on phonological level. "The

passage is spoken which brings about the use of lexical structure", Candidate B's description of the graphological and morphological characteristics of the passage follows the type done by candidate A. This kind of descriptions are mere gibberish.

- iii candidate 'C's' supposed stylistic interpretation of the passage is purely literary appreciation. This kind of response is common to most students. Most of the responses tilt towards impressionistic judgement.
- iv. there are many instances of imperfect constructions by the candidates. This is seen in the following constructions: this is used by the writer to portray the fact that only an idea or context is been discussed. Also. "The domineering sentence type is complex sentence".

The question demands the students to identify and describe those sentences/clauses phrases and words that help project the theme of love.

Model Stylistic Analysis of the Passage (Based on Leech & Short's Framework)

Lexical Level

The passage employs a high frequency of archaic words characteristic of Early Modern English biblical translations: *suffereth, envieth, vaunteth, puffed up, rejoiceth, beareth, faileth, prophesies, abideth*. These lexical choices project an authoritative, timeless tone, reinforcing the absolute and unchanging nature of love.

Abstract nouns dominate: *love, faith, hope, prophecy, knowledge, mysteries, truth*. This abstraction shifts the focus from concrete actions to philosophical qualities, positioning love as a universal principle rather than a transient emotion.

Grammatical Level (Syntactic Patterns)

The first three sentences follow a parallel structure: conditional clause (*Though I speak... though I have... though I bestow...*) followed by a main clause (*I am become... it profiteth me nothing*). This syntactic parallelism foregrounds the contrast between human achievements/charisms and the absence of love. The repeated conjunction *though* creates a cumulative effect, building up to the anticlimax of worthlessness without love.

In contrast, the central definition of love (verses 4–7) uses a series of short declarative clauses with zero linking verbs: *Love suffereth long, is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself...* These staccato structures convey certainty and enumerate love's attributes with rhythmic authority.

Cohesion and Discourse

The passage employs lexical cohesion through repetition of the node word *love* (11 times), reinforced by anaphoric references (*it, itself*). The adversative conjunction *but* appears three times to mark contrast: (1) gifts vs. love (v.1–3), (2) partial vs. perfect knowledge (v. 9–10), (3) faith/hope/love vs. love as greatest (v.13). These contrasts build a hierarchical argument culminating in the supremacy of love.

Graphological Features

The single paragraph structure (in the original epistle) visually unifies the meditation. The parenthetical citation (*I Corinthians 13*) serves as an external reference but is not a stylistic foregrounding device – a common student misconception.

Relating to Theme of Love

Every linguistic choice – archaic lexis for authority, parallel conditionals for contrast, declarative series for definition,

adversative connectors for hierarchy – conspires to elevate love above all spiritual gifts and knowledge. The theme is not merely stated but enacted through syntax and lexis.

In addition, the alpha clauses are all in declarative terms as in: love is kind, love never fails, love endureth all things, love is not easily provoked. The speaker's use of these declarative that 'love' is greater than other gifts or knowledge man may desire to possess. We have the use of archaic expression typical of old English / biblical language as in:

'envieth not'	meaning	does not envy
'endureth'	meaning	endures
Thinketh no evil'	meaning	does not think evil
'never faileth'	meaning	does not fail
'rejoiceth not in	meaning	does not rejoice in
'beareth all things'	meaning	bears all things

These expressions are employed to positively portray 'love'. The expressions reinforce the fact that 'love' is indeed greater than the gift of prophecy, knowledge of all mysteries etc.

Cohesive elements 'but whether' are used appropriately to indicate contrast between love and other attributes or gifts as in the sentence.

Love never faileth, but whether there be prophesies, they shall be done away

And in the last sentence but is used for emphasis. This is intended to emphasise the fact that love is more crucial than the other attributes as seen in: And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three, but the greatest of these is love.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has demonstrated that Nigerian undergraduate students of English face three interrelated problems when asked to describe the style of a text: (1) confusion between literary appreciation and linguistic stylistic analysis, leading to impressionistic or thematic summaries; (2) superficial or incorrect use of stylistic terminology (e.g., foregrounding, graphology); and (3) poor grammatical competence that hinders precise description. The sample responses from Candidates A–D illustrate these problems vividly. Candidate C's response, while cognitively engaged, relies entirely on figures of speech (simile, metaphor, hyperbole) – a literary approach – rather than on linguistic evidence. Candidates A, B, and D attempt to use stylistic categories (phonology, graphology, morphology) but apply them incorrectly or in a vacuous manner.

Recommendations:

1. Curriculum revision: Introduce the fundamentals of stylistics at the upper secondary school level so that students entering university possess basic concepts (foregrounding, lexical categories, syntactic patterns).
2. Explicit instruction: University courses in stylistics must move beyond theoretical definitions to hands-on practice with diverse text types, using frameworks such as Leech & Short (1981).
3. Language proficiency: Given that many students struggle with English grammar, stylistics courses should integrate remedial grammar modules or prerequisites.
4. Assessment design: Examination questions should require students to identify specific linguistic features (e.g., "list three archaic verbs and explain their effect") rather than open-ended prompts that invite literary appreciation

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