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Exploring the Language of Poems, Plays and Prose
Mick Short

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For
Hilary, Hiroko and Ben,
both my Mums and Dads,
and Tom and Floozie

Contents

CHAPTER 3

Style variation in texts

3.1 Style variation in English

In 2.2.3 we noticed that poets can produce surprise effects by importing into a text a word belonging to another variety of language. In this chapter we will examine the way in which some writers make systematic use of such **style variation,** that is, variation from one identifiable kind of English (*e.g.* formal, informal) to another within the same text. In the process we will analyse two relatively simple poems by Philip Larkin and Edward Thomas, and then look at a more complex example by Henry Reed. In carrying out the analyses we will be making use of the intuitive knowledge which we possess of different varieties of language and the linguistic features which distinguish them.

It might be argued that style variation is merely another kind of foregrounding produced through the device of internal deviation discussed in the last chapter, and in a sense it is, as internal deviation clearly occurs. But so far we have used the notion of foregrounding to apply to the perceptual highlighting of very small portions of text (words, phrases or lines) and the idea that a large section of a poem might be foregrounded because it varies in style from previous sections is not so appealing intuitively. The foregrounding effect is likely to be strong in the first few words of the new style, but will then fade away. This makes it difficult to believe that a long stretch of text can all be foregrounded in this way. Consequently, I have decided to treat style variation separately.

Without being consciously aware of it, native speakers of English can perceive language varieties associated with **dialect** (*e.g.* regional dialects, class dialects, men's *vs* women's language, adult *vs* child language), **medium** (*e.g.* written *vs* spoken language), **tenor** (*e.g.* formal *vs* informal language, accessible *vs* inaccessible language) and **domain** (*e.g.* the language of advertising, legal language, the language of instruction and the language of science). I will not provide a comprehensive account of language variation here, but below I give a brief account of the concepts just referred to in order to contextualise the discussion of literary texts which follow in 3.2 onwards. Your intuitive knowledge of language variation should allow you to follow the discussion of the texts without too much difficulty, and if you want to explore language variation more fully, references are provided in the notes and further reading sections at the end of this chapter.[1]

3.1.1 Language variation: dialect

Dialectal variation in relation to what part of the country people come from is probably the most well known kind of language variation. However, there is a tendency for many people to equate dialect with accent (phonetic variation). It is often possible for us to infer roughly where someone comes from by listening to their accent. Just about everybody in England intuitively knows, for example, that Northern and Southern varieties of British English differ in their pronunciation of the 'a' and 'u' vowels. Hence, in general terms, 'bath' is pronounced /baθ/ in the North and /baːθ/ in the South, and 'bus' is pronounced /bus/ and /bʌs/ respectively (see the appendix for a guide to the pronunciation of phonetic symbols). But dialect variation can involve variation at any linguistic level. *Lexical* variation can be illustrated by the fact that the word 'hill' in the South of England may be replaced by 'fell' in the North or 'tor' in the South–west, and *morphological* variation by the fact that although the past tense of the verb 'treat' is generally formed by adding the '–ed' ending it can be 'tret' in some dialects. There is also a striking, though probably apocryphal, tale concerning *grammatical* dialect variation. The word 'while' is a conjunction used to introduce subordinate clauses of time in Southern forms of English, as can be seen in sentences like 'I

3.7 An extended example of style variation

We have already dealt with language variation according to domain inside a text without noting it explicitly, when we examined 'Adlestrop' in 3.5. The reason that lexical items to do with trains and the countryside respectively occur in the two stanzas is because Thomas has chosen to write about the subject matters with which those items are associated. The grouping of lexical items into associated areas of vocabulary are referred to by linguists as **lexical** or **associative fields**. In 'Naming of Parts', Henry Reed, a World War II poet, produces a systematic series of contrasts between the lexical fields associated with war and the natural world. In so doing he also exploits our intuitive knowledge of military language and the language of instruction:

Example 9

To–day we have naming of parts. Yesterday, (1)
We had daily cleaning. And to–morrow morning,
We shall have what to do after firing. But to–day,
To–day we have naming of parts. Japonica
Glistens like coral in all of the neighbouring gardens, (5)
And to–day we have naming of parts.

This is the lower sling swivel. And this
Is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will see,
When you are given your slings. And this is the piling swivel,
Which in your case you have not got. The branches (10)
Hold in the gardens their silent, eloquent gestures,
Which in our case we have not got.

This is the safety–catch, which is always released
With an easy flick of the thumb. And please do not let me
See anyone using his finger. You can do it quite easy (15)
If you have any strength in your thumb. The blossoms
Are fragile and motionless, never letting anyone see
Any of them using their finger.

And this you can see is the bolt. The purpose of this
Is to open the breech, as you see. We can slide it (20)
Rapidly backwards and forwards: we call this
Easing the spring. And rapidly backwards and forwards
The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the flowers:
They call it easing the Spring.

They call it easing the Spring: it is perfectly easy (25)
If you have any strength in your thumb: like the bolt,
And the breech, and the cocking–piece, and the point of balance,
Which in our case we have not got; and the almond blossom
Silent in all of the gardens and the bees going backwards
and forwards, (30)
For today we have naming of parts.

(Henry Reed, 'Naming of Parts')

If we look at the first four verses of this poem we can see that there is a systematic division which takes place in the middle of the fourth line of each stanza. Up to that point in each verse the speaker is a weapons instructor in the army, probably a sergeant or a corporal, giving instructions on the use of a rifle to some assembled recruits. However, the remaining part of each stanza appears to be the unspoken thoughts of one of those recruits. Alternatively, the recruit could be directly addressing us, the readers. Often, when the poem is performed it is read by two people, the first with a working–class 'sergeant major' voice, and the other with voice properties like those I have already suggested for the second half of 'Adlestrop'.

The most obvious features of the language of instruction are the use of commands. *And please do not let me/See anyone using his finger* (14/15) is an imperative command and *and to–morrow morning,/We shall have what to do after firing* (2/3) can be interpreted as a combined statement and command. Other, less obvious features of the language of instruction, are sentences where the speaker tells the hearers what they must already know (*e.g. And this is the piling swivel,/Which in your case you have not got* (9/10) or where he tells them what they are capable of doing (*e.g. You can do it quite easy/If you have any strength in your thumb* (15/16)).

These instructions assume an audience which has the rifles referred to in their possession. We know this for a variety of reasons. Firstly, there are a number of words or phrases which refer to items present in the immediate situational context and code those items in terms of distance from the speaker. Such expressions are usually called **deictic.**[3] Examples are *this* (indicating that the item is close to the speaker; *cf.* 'that') in stanzas 2, 3 and 4 and the close time deictics *to–day, yesterday* and *to–morrow* in stanza 1 (compare 'that day', 'the day before' and 'the day after'). In this case, of course, there is no real situational context; instead we, the readers, have to imagine an

appropriate situation. The use of **deixis** is thus one of the ways in which writers persuade readers to imagine a fictional world when they read poems, novels and plays.

The second reason that we know that the instructor is addressing a set of people present with him is his use of pronouns (*I/me; you* and *we*) referring to himself and his listeners. There is also some verbal indication that he is **monitoring** the reactions of his hearers as he speaks to them (*cf. as you see* in line 20).[4]

The fact that it is military weapon training that the men are being instructed in is made clear by use of the relevant technical terminology, and the status of the instructor as a non–commissioned officer is indicated by the use of the adjective *easy* as an adverb in line 15. This is a grammatical feature associated with various working–class dialects of English, and in World War II the commissioned officers would have been from the middle–classes and above, and the 'lower ranks' would have comprised working–class soldiers.

The poetic description of the natural world in the gardens surrounding the soldiers will not need such detailed examination as we have already covered similar ground in our examination of 'Adlestrop'. In the last two and a half lines of each stanza, starting with the new sentence in the fourth line in each case, the rifle terminology, short sentences and instructional language are replaced by words and phrases referring to the natural world, longer sentences and poetic tropes like simile and metaphor (*e.g. Japonica/Glistens like coral* and *The branches/Hold in the gardens their silent, eloquent gestures*).

The result of all of this is a comparison between war and its accompanying death and destruction on the one hand, and, on the other, the peace of the gardens and the generative qualities of the natural world (*e.g. The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the flowers:/They call it easing the Spring*. This contrast is made more ironic and direct by a complex pattern of lexical repetition. The last line of each of the stanzas, which is thus in the 'natural world' part of the poem in each case, constitutes a repetition of phraseology found in the 'weapon training' section of that stanza. The war world thus appears at first sight to invade the natural world.

I have made a point so far of talking only about the first four stanzas of the poem. This is because the last stanza constitutes a significant and interesting *internal deviation* from the pattern so far described. At first sight its juncture in line 4

also reflects the war/nature division seen in the rest of the poem. But this time the line 4 syntactic division is *not* a sentence division. Indeed, despite a number of major syntactic junctures, the last stanza is one complete sentence. Moreover, this time *the whole stanza* is made up of an amalgam of repetitive echoes from earlier stanzas. Most of the echoes in the first three and a half lines of the stanza come from the war sections of previous stanzas, but not all of them do. In particular, the first clause *They call it easing the Spring* is a repetition from the last line of the previous stanza. We know this must be a nature reference, not a military one because the word *Spring* is capitalised, as it was in the nature section of stanza 4, but *not* in the war section of the stanza where it first appears.

Once we have noticed the point about *Spring* it is easier to see that *Which in our case we have not got* in line 28 is a more exact repetition of the natural world version of line 12 than the war world version in line 10. The 'garden' section of the last stanza, on the other hand, repeats items exclusively from the natural world sections of previous verses, except for the very last line of the poem, which repeats the clause in the first stanza which occurred in both the war and nature parts of the stanza.

What are we to make of these internally deviant features of the last stanza of 'Naming of Parts'? In the first four stanzas it seemed that the pattern of repetition represented the invasion of the natural world by the world of war. But in the last stanza it is the opposite which happens, suggesting a triumph of life over death or at least a hopeful resolution in the 'double' repetition of the poem's last line. Henry Reed thus manipulates style variation in a particularly sophisticated way in order to guide us in interpreting his poem.

3.8 How finicky can you get?

The analysis of Henry Reed's 'Naming of Parts' may well have raised in your mind an issue concerning how much linguistic detail a reader can be expected to pick up. Is it really plausible that readers will notice such a small thing as a capital versus a small 's' and then treat it as interpretatively significant in the way I have just suggested? Surely real readers aren't like that?

Well, what evidence there is suggests that readers (and hearers too, for that matter) do indeed pick up extremely fine nuances and small linguistic details subconsciously, even if they cannot explicitly describe what they have intuitively reacted to. One small difference in pronunciation can help us tell where people come from, even when they are trying to disguise their accents, and governments sometimes suggest changes in policy by very small language changes (*e.g.* 'we' instead of 'them', 'England' instead of 'Britain'). These sorts of changes are certainly noticed by people, and given that the insertion of one frame into a film can produce a subliminal response in spite of the fact that the watchers will not know they have seen the picture involved, there should be nothing surprising in readers picking up very small linguistic details and treating them subconsciously as significant. The task for the stylistic critic is, through analysis, to make those subconscious factors explicitly available for examination to help us debate interpretative disagreements rationally and openly.

The fact that the evidence does appear to be in favour of readers noticing very small–scale linguistic features is extremely fortunate. Although the alternative assumption to that of the **perfect reader**[5] which stylistics normally presupposes (namely the **average reader**[6]) is beguiling at first sight, it turns out to be much more difficult to deal with. If you assume that readers will notice some things but not others the critic is then faced with having to decide where to draw the line for any particular text. This would seem to be impossible to do. For critical purposes, then, it is much more realistic to assume that literally any detail may turn out to be significant, and that readers will be prepared to use any kind of evidence available to turn literature's apparent non–sense and lack of pattern into patterned interpretative sense. As Leech (1974: 7) says, 'the human mind abhors a vacuum of sense'.

Exercise 3

Examine Philip Larkin's use of style variation in his poem 'Vers de Société'.

Discussion of exercises

Exercise 1

Lexis: *(stupid, gormless)*

Grammar: *none* for 'not' (*I'm none as ormin' as I look*); use of a variant of the archaic '–est' ending for second person singular present tense verbs (*seest ta*); addition of the '–s' ending to first person singular present tense verbs (*I says to him*); *her* as subject pronoun instead of 'she' (*'Er's held back all this long*); use of the 'thee'/'thou'/ 'thy' system for second person singular pronouns (*'E'd none ha' had thee for my tellin'; tha looks a man; that letter o' thine*)

Orthographical representation of pronunciation: *ormin'* – use of /n/ instead of /ŋ/ for words ending in '–ing'; removal of /l/ where it occurs before /d/ at the ends of syllables in Standard English plus attendant lip rounding (*I towd him*); *sen* for 'self' (*mysen*); *tha* for 'thou'; dropping of initial /h/ (*'e's a fool*; *scrat* for 'scratch'; dropping of /v/ in word–final position of grammatical words (*'e'd none ha' had thee; that letter o' thine*).

The representation is not an accurate one, but rather a series of deviations which we interpret as representative of the dialect concerned. Some of the deviations will be quite close to the target dialect form, particularly the lexical and grammatical features, but it is not really possible for a writer to produce an accurate representation of the pronunciation of someone *via* our writing system. A phonetic alphabet, specially set up for the purpose, would be needed for that. For example, the 'the' of *at th' gate* would probably disappear entirely in this dialect and be realised by lack of plosion on the glottal stop which would represent the /t/ of *at*. This glottal stop would then be 'converted' into the /g/ at the beginning of *gate*. The *th'*–spelling thus represents a kind of compromise between what can be represented by our spelling system and the phonetic reality. Lawrence's representation is also not entirely consistent. 'Her' turns up as both *'er* and *her*, for example.

But it would be unreasonable to criticise Lawrence for not producing an exact representation of the dialect that Mrs Goodall would have spoken. In essence it is impossible to do, given the constraints of the writing system we use and the author's need to produce a representation which can be read and understood reasonably easily as well as giving the flavour

of the dialect. For more discussion of this matter see Leech and Short (1981: 160–70) and 6.3 below.

Exercise 2
Formal lexis (*e.g. we have partaken in moderation*); formal use of vocatives (*my friends, my young friends*); archaisms (*e.g. whence*); rhetorical questions and answers; long strings of overtly parallel structures which merely repeat one another's meaning in other words (*may it grow, may it thrive, may it prosper, may it advance, may it proceed, may it press forward*), frequent use of dead metaphors (*the fatness of the land; you are to us a diamond/gem/jewel*).

Exercise 3
For an extensive discussion of this poem see Trengove (1989).

Notes

1. See, for example Crystal and Davy (1969), O'Donnell and Todd (1980), Leech, Deuchar and Hoogenraad (1982: Chs 8–9) and Freeborn, French and Langford (1986).
2. For a discussion of this poem, see Short and Candlin (1988)
3. See 9.3.5, and Lyons (1981: 228–42).
4. See Leech, Deuchar and Hoogenraad (1982: 139–40).
5. See Leavis (1952: 212–13).
6. See Riffaterre (1965).

Further reading

Accessible introductions to variation in English are Crystal and Davy (1969), O'Donnell and Todd (1980), Leech, Deuchar and Hoogenraad (1982: Chs 8–9) and Freeborn, French and Langford (1986). Leech (1969: Ch. 1 and 49–52) discusses styles and style variation in poetry. O'Donnell and Todd (1980: Ch. 7), Leech, Deuchar and Hoogenraad (1982: Ch. 10) and Freeborn, French and Langford (1986: Ch. 9) discuss English literature in terms of language variation. Short (1993) discusses 'To Paint a Water Lily' by Ted Hughes, a poem which uses the language of instruction as a 'backdrop' for describing how to paint the lily.

CHECKSHEET 2: STYLE VARIATION

A. Dialect

(a) What dialect is the text in? Does it vary from standard written English? If so, what is the purpose of this deviation from the norm for written English?
(b) What linguistic features (*e.g.* vocabulary, grammar, spelling) indicate the dialect?
(c) Is there any variation in the text with respect to dialect (for example, do any characters speak in a variety different from the 'default dialect' for the text?)? If so, what effect does this variation produce in terms of interpretation or reader attitude?

B. Other variation (according to subject matter, function, tenor or medium)

(a) What linguistic variety does the text you are examining use as its basic style? Is it an unusual one for the literary genre that the text comes from? If so, what effect does this have?
(b) What are the linguistic features (*e.g.* vocabulary, grammar, spelling) which indicate the variety (or varieties)?
(c) Are there any parts of the text which have features associated with a different language variety? If so, what are the linguistic features which indicate the change? What consequences does this style variation have for the interpretation of the text as a whole?

extracts, although fairly detailed, has not been exhaustive by any means. But it should have helped to demonstrate the processes we are involved in when we read (or listen) and understand with such apparent ease. Because our processes of understanding are so deeply inculcated they seem almost instinctive. It often appears that to understand a text is merely to look at it, much as we would look through a transparent window onto the world outside. But this apparently transparent process turns out to be both complex and interesting. And looking in on the way in which we interact with the language of literary texts helps us to learn not just about those interesting writings but, just as importantly, about ourselves.

Notes

1. For advice on how to go about the stylistic analysis of a poem, see Short (1993).
2. For a discussion of the 'death is sleep' metaphor, see Lakoff and Turner (1989: 18–19).
3. These lines are difficult for the unwary to parse and therefore act successfully. In the first clause *The multitudinous seas* is object to the verb *incarnadine*, and, in the second, *the green* is object to *Making*, with *one red* as its complement. *The green* is thus a general noun phrase referring back to *multitudinous seas*, all of which are green, and all of which become red as a consequence of Macbeth trying to wash the blood from his hand. This would seem to fit well with Macbeth's general attitude in the scene. However, it is possible to arrive at a parsing of the last clause, which is more usual in modern English, whereby *the green one* is object to *Making* and *red* is the complement. But this analysis induces the rather odd semantic consequence where one green sea, out of a set not all of which are green, is made red, an oddity which is also difficult to integrate into our overall interpretation of the scene. Actors beware!

APPENDIX

A list of English phonemes

The list of English phonemes below is based on Knowles (1987: 221-2).

Vowels

iː	reed	/riːd/	ə	the	/ðə/
i	rid	/rid/	ə	about	/əbaut/
e	red	/red/	ə	sofa	/soufə/
a	bad	/bad/	ei	raise	/reiz/
aː	shah	/ʃaː/	ou	rose	/rouz/
o	cod	/kod/	ai	rise	/raiz/
oː	law	/loː/	au	rouse	/rauz/
u	could	/kud/	oi	toy	/toi/
uː	mood	/muːd/	iə	beer	/biə/
ʌ	bud	/bʌd/	eə	there	/ðeə/
əː	bird	/bəːd/	uə	lure	/luə/

Consonants

p	pop	/pop/	s	sauce	/soːs/
b	bob	/bob/	z	zoos	/zuːz/
t	tight	/tait/	ʃ	sheep	/ʃiːp/
d	dead	/ded/	ʒ	leisure	/leʒə/
k	cake	/keik/	h	hat	/hat/
g	gag	/gag/	m	mime	/maim/
tʃ	church	/tʃəːtʃ/	n	noon	/nuːn/
dʒ	judge	/dʒʌdʒ/	ŋ	singing	/siŋiŋ/

f	fife	/faif/	l	lull	/lʌl/
v	van	/van/	r	rain	/rein/
θ	thirty	/θəːti/	j	yacht	/jot/
ð	then	/ðen/	w	will	/wil/

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