

A Way in: A Stylistic Analysis of Poetry

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Introduction

Language and literature would seem to be related, but a review of the literature of language learning finds them often worlds apart. Since 1945, literature and especially poetry have been excluded from most language learning programmes, largely because of an emphasis on the study, rather than the reading, of literature (Gilroy-Scott, 1983). Literary criticism continued to focus on interpretation, and the field of linguistics had little to say about literature beyond the sentence level (Ching et al. 1980). The grammar-translation approach to language learning utilized literary texts, but with no attempt to establish their relevance beyond the arena of cultural understanding; we were reminded that literature was its own reward, along perhaps with a worn-out dictionary. The subsequent advent of the audiolingual approach had even less use for literary texts, when compared to the careful and gradual accumulation of correct linguistic structures (Widdowson, 1982). Since then, however, a substantial body of language learning theory has focused on the communicative basis of language. With this socio-cultural shift in our perspective has come a renewed interest for the integration of literature into language learning programs. Additional support for this perspective comes from recent research in psycholinguistics and reading and the corresponding view that the reader is an active participant who brings meaning and value to a particular text (Goodman, 1967; Smith, 1973).

Stylistics

The emphasis on text/reader interaction has necessarily spawned a strong interest in literature as social discourse (Pratt, 1977; Fowler, 1981) with its concomitant participants, expectations, and purposes. The potential for linguistic contribution to literary discourse is explored under the category of stylistics. Stylistics can be further described as the study of literature as a mode of communication (Widdowson, 1975). De Beaugrande and Dressler conclude that 'it follows that style is really only definable in terms of the operations carried out by the producers and receivers of texts...' (1981:16). Fowler discusses literature as social discourse; both reader and literary text are included in a social frame: 'as discourses, all kinds of ways are open to interpret and describe (literary texts) in terms of their vital cultural functions' (1981:7).

Regarding language teaching and learning, the question becomes whether literature can reasonably demonstrate the communicative link between form and function, and thus be of service to the needs

of language learners. Given an awareness of literature as discourse, together with our current understanding of the communicative functions of language, we must examine the potential uses of literary texts in the design of teaching materials, together with methodological approaches for their presentation. Stylistics is such an approach.

Accordingly, I wish to present here a stylistic analysis of a single poem to see if such an analysis can convey to ESL and EFL learners important information about textual cohesion and coherence in language, as well as indicate certain schematic strategies (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983) that may give learners access to such information. Such an approach should also provide us with procedures for developing the ability to both recognize and interpret such notions as reference, register, and illocutionary acts.

It remains to establish a significant link between literary and non-literary text/discourses. If we accept as our prime goal the enabling of learners to both comprehend and produce discourse as it occurs in a natural variety of human contexts, then we must pursue that variety. As Widdowson comments: 'For someone to correctly interpret discourse he needs to be able to recognize relevant conditions in situations he has never encountered before...' (1979:156).

Poetry and Poems

Poetry in particular has often been avoided when literature is proposed (see McKay, 1982). After all, the arguments run, how can either explication or interpretation of such economical or aesthetic use of language be of much use to the beginning or even intermediate learner of English? Add to that the literary convention of time, meter, metaphor, and so forth and you have a problem beyond the reach and therefore province of most language learners. This need not be a criticism, however, of poetry, but rather the methodology and purpose to which it is applied. Its application is, in fact, often proposed as a diverting measure of relief from the predictable routine of a strictly linguistic approach to language learning (Widdowson, 1979). This side-show use of poetry has resulted in the shredding of otherwise readable poems; E. E. Cummings and Lewis Carroll are only two of the many whose poems have been drafted and pressed into some linguistic service. These have not been happy soldiers.

Such explications often focus on the more popular code-breakers, but it is not necessary to rely on these sometimes esoteric models of language. Their use has often eclipsed much poetry that uses apparently normal language (Ching et al., 1980). A fresh look at contemporary poetry will reveal its overriding 'concern with contemporary issues-issues which are the concern and province of native and non-native speakers alike. In fact, such poetry is often defined by its author's decision to call it poetry; fragments from newspapers or overheard conversations, for instance, may, by their mere presence in the poem, constitute an aspect of poetic language (Short, 1983).

This focus on ordinary language is important, especially when regarding the selection of particular poems that illustrate relevant features of literary discourse. Halliday long ago suggested that both literary and non-literary texts could be described by common features of so-called ordinary language (Halliday et al. 1964). More recently, M. L. Pratt has stressed this aspect: 'The very notion of literature is a normative one... critics who try to define literature without reference to human values and preferences easily end up presupposing values and preferences-inevitably their own' (1977:124). Our particular text is the poem 'the way & the way things are' by Nila NorthSun, an American Indian (Shoshone/Cheppewa) poet:

the way & the way things are

1 gramma thinks about her grandchildren
 they're losing the ways
 don't know how to talk indian
 4 don't understand me when
 i ask for tobacco
 don't know how to skin a rabbit
 sad sad
 8 they're losing the ways
 but gramma
 you told your daughters
 marry white men
 12 told them they would have
 nicer houses
 fancy cars
 pretty clothes
 16 could live in the city
 gramma your daughters did
 they couldn't speak indian anymore
 how could we grandchildren learn
 20 there are no rabbits to skin
 in the city
 we have no gramma there to
 teach us the ways
 24 you were still on the reservation
 asking somebody anybody
 please
 get me tobacco

Nila NorthSun (1979)

NorthSun's poem seems especially useful for its apparent use of ordinary language. Pratt insists that it is not necessary to distinguish literary materials from any other kind: 'It is people, not properties, that "make verbal message a verbal work of art" - people writing, editing, revising, reading, and judging' (1977:124).

The poem is noteworthy for both its lack of metaphor and its conversational tone. A brief definition of poetry - by a poet - will help clarify the term 'ordinary'. Poet Gary Snyder, in an essay on the paleolithic roots of poetry, writes: 'Poetry (is) the skilled and inspired use of the voice and language to embody rare and powerful states of mind that are in immediate origin personal to the singer, but at deep levels common to all who listen' (1957:117).

Discourse and Interaction

Snyder's 'all who listen' remark affirms, from the poet's viewpoint, what many have understood to be the interactive relationship among text, reader, and discourse comprehension (see Tierny & Mosenthal, 1982). This interactive process begins with the recognition by the reader that the text-discourse indeed has potential for meaning; we expect it to make sense. Brown and Yule remark: 'The natural effort of hearers and readers alike is to attribute relevance and coherence to the text they encounter until they are forced not to' (1983:66). Initially, this encounter with the text involves recognizing the poem, and poetry, as an activity type of its own (Levinson 1979). This is relevant because it shapes our expectations as readers/listeners of the poem. In the same way, recognition of a

particular speech act - making a request, for instance-will affect our approach to the poem as discourse (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1965).

Cohesion

Language users will first encounter a text by its surface features, i.e., a configuration of words having some propositional development (Widdowson, 1978), or continuity. According to Halliday and Hassan (1976), it is cohesion that establishes this continuity, and cohesive ties which give us access to it: 'The concept of ties makes it possible to analyze a text in terms of its cohesive properties and give a systematic account of its patterns of texture' (1976:4). Included among these cohesive properties are reference, substitution and ellipsis, reiteration, collocation, and conjunction.

The poem 'the way & the way things are' conveys information about a cultural conflict involving family members, and centres on the role of the grandmother figure, *gramma*. The narrator is the granddaughter. Briefly, in the first stanza of the poem, she relates her grandmother's thoughts. In the second stanza, she reports her grandmother's advice. In the third stanza, she reports the consequences of that advice, and in the final stanza, she repeats the grandmother's request. Three generations of family members are specifically referred to within the poem: *gramma*, her *daughters*, and her *grandchildren*.

In order to identify the various participants in the discourse, it is useful to begin by looking at the considerable variety of pronominal reference, and how that reference changes from stanza to stanza, according to function and point of view. For example, in the first stanza, the grandmother's thoughts are related: she *thinks* about *her* grandchildren (line 1). We see as well the possessive reference to her grandchildren. The third person plural *they* (2) refers back to the grandchildren. And it is the grandmother who complains 'don't understand *me* when i ask for tobacco' (4, 5).

In the second stanza, the grandmother is confronted, as indicated by the abrupt use of the adversative conjunction *but* (9), and the direct, second person *you* (10). The possessive form *your* (10) refers to the daughters of the grandmother; they are, of course, the mothers of the grandchildren as well, but never in the poem are these women referred to in their role as mothers, but only as daughters; their role, or function, is pronominally indicated and suggests responsibilities and expectations as well. By now, *they* (12, 18) refers to the daughters of the grandmother rather than the grandchildren.

Within the third stanza, the use of *we* (19, 22) refers only to the grandchildren. Other family members are pronominally excluded, as it were, and a pattern of surface elements within the poem is emerging, and it concerns issues as well as relationships.

The final *asking* (27) of the poem now posits a crucial question: Who, after all, is being asked? Is it a member or member of the family? Hardly; by the end of the poem, the potential 'getters' of tobacco are anonymous: *somebody anybody* (25). A look in several dictionaries (e.g., *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*) reveals little difference between these indefinite pronouns - *somebody* being a bit more specific than *anybody*, but still unnamed. What is more significant, as provided within the context of the poem, is the sequence of the words: *somebody* precedes *anybody*. That is, we might reasonably assume that the initial request for tobacco is to somebody known by *gramma*. If that request goes unheeded, then anybody might do - perhaps even the reader of the poem (as literary participant). And why not? Apparently, this request has gone unheeded for nearly two

generations; time is running out. More importantly, to language learners, this urgency or value is indicated in the discourse by the author's lexical choice.

Meaning by Association

Cohesion in a text can be conveyed by means other than reference. A concern in the poem with the pronouns of possession suggests a look at other notions of possession as well. We have three such instances: *losing* (2, 8), *have* (12, 22), and *get* (27). Such lexical collocation suggests access to an 'associative potential' (Tierney & Mosenthal, 1982). In the first stanza, for instance, the line 'they're *losing* the ways' (2, 8) refers to the inability to '*talk* indian' (3) or '*skin* a rabbit' (6) or '*understand* me when i ask for tobacco' (4).

In the second stanza, the word *have* (12) refers not to ability, but to material things associated with living 'in the city': *houses*, *cars*, and *clothes* (13, 14, 15). Their itemized irrelevance is reinforced, and signaled, by their presentation as list:

nicer houses
fancy cars
pretty clothes

Even the adjectives (*nicer*, *fancy*, *pretty*) suggest superficial, ephemeral values. In the third stanza, the word *have* (22) reappears, now revealing part of the *sad sad* (7) irony of the poem, that is, what the grandchildren do not *have*: someone (anyone) to 'teach us the ways' (23).

Finally, there is the plea to '*get* me tobacco' (27). Whereas the poem begins by reporting a loss, it ends by asking for a reversal of this process: to have, to gain, to obtain, to receive, all the associations of *get*. Learners might also observe the only use in the poem of the present progressive tense; *losing* indicates an action in progress - therefore not yet complete or finished; this may be the only element of optimism in the discourse.

The semantic sense alone reveals little of the importance of loss and gain within the context of this poetic discourse; only by seeing these verbs (*losing*, *have*, *get*) in a contextual pattern does a knowledge of their corresponding pragmatic value begin to emerge. Language learners might go on to explore the associative potential of other "cohesive chains" (Tierney & Mosenthal, 1982) in the discourse - for example, *know*, *learn*, *teach*, *understand*.

Register

Brown & Yule (1983) suggest, as Pratt has, that it is people who communicate and make reference, and people who interpret and make inferences. As Halliday and Hassan have suggested, certain cohesive ties in a text enable readers to establish continuity, or patterns of texture. They also suggest that cohesion needs to be supplemented by a notion of register, which they have defined as 'variety according to use' (1964:77), or 'appropriateness to situation' (1976:13). Brown refers to the necessity of this in discourse: 'The adult second language learner must acquire adaptability of register in order to be able to encode and decode the discourse around him correctly' (1980:191). Sridhar (1982) discusses 'register confusion' in non-native English literature, and Rivers and Temperly propose that

the recognition of register will '... help (learners) to recognize the author's intent in conversational material in written English' (1978:14).

Register is often discussed in terms of degrees of formality and informality, and, in Turner's words, reflects 'adjustments to an audience' (1973:186). Poetry is, in some ways then, a case in contradiction: as genre, it is formal, published, and public; yet its content is often intimate. To that extent, the reader is also more involved, to perhaps the 'deeper levels' of Snyder's definition.

Leech (1969) identifies several features of register that may indicate degrees of formality. Among these are the presence of idiomatic phrases, and the use of contractions. Contractions, for example, are frequent (they're, don't, couldn't) and further indicate a colloquial, familiar register. Even the lack of punctuation or capitalization indicated informality, a lack of concern for orthographic conventions, and perhaps other conventions as well.

Such use indicates to us, as readers, the nature of the social relationships among the participants of this poetic discourse. The granddaughter-narrator uses the familiar, even intimate, expression when referring to her gramma. On the other hand, gramma laments the fact that her grandchildren cannot talk indian (3), and that her daughters no longer speak indian (18). Since there is no language called 'Indian', we must assume a colloquial usage, a term peculiar to a particular group, indicating a particular meaning. Who would use such a term? Perhaps white men, perhaps the grandchildren; in any case, another reminder of 'The way things are'.

Any impression of the poem as informal or casual, however, may be deceptive. We have yet a remaining example in the discourse to verify perhaps its most purposeful activity: that is, the speech act of request. How important is the grandmother's request? Consider the imperative please (26). It is the most formal element in the poem, and its use indicates a politeness often reserved for strangers-somebody anybody certainly qualify. The pragmatic value of this please is further indicated by its ability to command a single line in the arrangement of the poem-indeed it is the only word to do so.

Leech also notes that in any given situation we may 'automatically switch' to the appropriate register. The familiar tone of the poem, as indicated by the frequent colloquial markers, continues until the final plea when the registers are abruptly mixed. An understanding of the semantic sense alone of the word please is inadequate to account for its urgent value at the end of the poem. Only by hearing the term in contrast to the overall tone of the poem, do we sense this urgency. Register, then, like the patterning of pronouns, and the associative meanings of possession and loss, further extends the potential for a stylistic interpretation of NorthSun's poem.

Coherence

Stylistics reminds us that our goal is still the coherent interpretation of literary text as discourse. As Widdowson states: 'It is only when we see how items converge on a common frame of reference that we make sense of connections and achieve coherence in discourse' (1983:70). And Pratt speaks of the need for a contextually based approach to texts that spans various discourse types, among them literature, and finds such an approach in speech act theory: 'Speech act theory offers a useful and interesting way of treating (this) kind of contextual information' (Pratt 1977:80).

According to Searle, when we make an utterance, we also perform an act, such as asking a question, making a statement, issuing a warning, and so on. These constitute a special class described earlier

by Austin (1962) as illocutionary acts, which may be recognized by their function-as, for example, the grandmother's request for tobacco.

Pratt points out that 'ordinary language' is accompanied by 'ordinary language rules' and outlines the work of Grice (1975) concerning in particular the 'appropriateness conditions' that accompany a particular illocution- conditions which language users generally assume to be in effect. Hence, asking, or contradicting, or pleading, or advising are all illocutionary acts. In 'the way & the way things are' all of these acts are at work, and the relationships among participants suggest what is appropriate, or can be expected, under the circumstances. For example, in the act of advising ('you told your daughters marry white men'), the appropriateness condition requires the speaker to be in a position of authority. By implication, this telling was appropriate, and in the third stanza, this is verified: 'your daughters did' (17). Appropriately, the daughters did as they were told. The effect however is to heighten the sense of irony regarding the sad results. Furthermore, the sequence of illocutionary acts-from telling to asking-indicate a reversal or loss of authority, and yet another aspect of 'the way things are'. This contextual aspect is affirmed by Widdowson: 'Discourse is coherent to the extent that we recognize it as representative of normal language use, and to the extent that we can accept the sequence of illocutionary acts as conforming to known conventions' (1978:44).

Schema Theory

The communicative emphasis of late in language learning and teaching stresses that there is far more to understanding discourse than a strictly linguistic perspective allows. In other words, say van Dijk and Kintsch, 'much of the information needed to understand a text is not provided by the information expressed in the text itself, but must be drawn from the language user's knowledge of the person, objects, states of affairs, actions, or events the discourse is about' (1983:303). The language user's ability to represent this knowledge and information in an accessible pattern is represented by the notion of schema theory '(Bartlett 1932, Rumelhart 1980). Rumelhart defines schema as '...a data structure for representing the generic concepts stored in memory' (1980:34). A scheme, then, enables us to tie together, or assign meaning, to new information based upon what we already know.

Essential to this understanding of the role of schema in discourse comprehension is the awareness that the schema is always constructed. Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) present a strategic approach to comprehension based upon the role of schema in which they detail a variety of comprehension strategies which enable language users to assess various contextual conditions and thus infer the significance of a particular speech act, for example. They are especially concerned with the way schemata or 'schematic strategies' enable language users to anticipate information from texts. There exist also 'schematic constraints' which can be compared to Grice's 'appropriateness conditions'. Different situations call for different strategies in the construction of coherent text. It is this constructive nature of schema which Rumelhart terms 'the building blocks of cognition' (1980:33). We may already, in fact, have activated various schemata in looking at North Sun's poem. In the speech act of requesting, for example, it is a social knowledge, or 'family schema', that enables us to recognize the nature of a request based upon rank and familiarity, and signaled in part by reference and register.

Importance has also been clearly attached to the notion of loss and gain. But what is being lost and what does grandma wish to gain? One of the first things we notice in the title of the poem is the repetition of the word way, suggesting perhaps a differentiated meaning. Within the poem, the word

ways occurs three more times (2, 8, 23). The first two references concern the ability to 'talk indian' and 'skin a rabbit'. In the third stanza, we learn that these ways are teachable, or learnable. By implication, a special kind of knowledge exists which is passed on from one generation to the next; a cycle is suggested.

Two places are described by North Sun in 'the way & the way things are': the city (16, 21) and the reservation (24). A language user's knowledge of city life, for example, will involve the application again of certain schematic constraints, i.e., a 'city schema' may be activated, and could easily include houses, cars, and clothes. To city-dwellers, this might be the most accessible element in the discourse.

The reservation, however, is a far different place; there, people do things with their hands, like skin rabbits. It is also the place where the way now exists, as something lasting and enduring, and represented by the presence of the grandmother, 'still on the reservation', who is succeeded in the cycle of generations by her daughters, and in turn by their children. Beyond this basic information, however, few ESL learners could be expected to have more than passing knowledge about Indian life in North America; it is more likely, in fact, that they possess a certain amount of Hollywood misinformation about Indians. More relevant information, then, would describe the grandmother's time, and the time of her ancestors when there was no division between life 'on the reservation', and life 'in the city', when children, or grandchildren did not move away, and where the social status of the grandmother no doubt remained high, and would not find her asking strangers for a return of what was lost.

An overview

We might now apply the various stylistic procedures and strategies to the object of the grandmother's request; she asks only for one thing: tobacco. In the first stanza, it is this asking that the grandchildren 'don't understand'. If tobacco, '...any of a genus of plants native to tropical America, widely cultivated for its leaves...' (*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*) were an idea or concept, this lack of understanding might fit; after all, asking for tobacco isn't so difficult to imagine. Concepts and ideas might be, however, If tobacco were merely the '...dried leaves, used primarily for smoking...' then we should find a different auxiliary than don't~ the negative modal can (+ not), referring to ability, would fit the more literal interpretation. Even the use of the objective case pronoun me suggests that it is gramma herself who is misunderstood, not simply a word. Such a misunderstanding implies a misunderstood illocutionary act. If this asking has illocutionary value, then we may infer that this value is, in fact, what has been lost: i.e., the way, or ways. It follows that having lost this way, one is entitled to ask for its return-especially one who has stood for it for so long.

There is other historical and cultural evidence to affirm the strong symbolic value of tobacco as it occurs in the poem. Before messengers could deliver news from one tribe to another, a sacred pipe was passed; only then could the message be accepted as true. When this so-called peace pipe was extended as well to the white men of the continent, it followed that they too were telling the truth. And the burning of tobacco ('the dried leaves used primarily for smoking') is equally telling: the pipe of clay (Earth) releases the smoke which ascends upward (Heaven). Thus, a great unity is symbolized as well - a unity that indicates humankind's connection to not only this earth, but beyond to this way of being, of continuing. For Simon Ortiz, another contemporary Native American writer, this is a frequent theme: 'Because Indians always tell a story. The only way to continue is to tell a story and

there is no other way. Your children will not survive unless you tell something about them-how they were born, how they came to this certain place, how they continued' (Ortiz, 1976).

Culture and Cultural Bias

Such culturally specific information as the special significance of tobacco must, of course, be recognized and anticipated. However, many of the contextual conditions that contribute to the work of Searle, Grice, and others operate 'within a specific cultural and ethnographic frame' (Candlin, 1981:171) and will not, therefore, apply across cultures. Van Dijk and Kintsch comment: 'Language users interact as members of a specific culture, as participants in social situations, as well as at an interpersonal, pragmatic level, and each level has associated with it a variety of conventionalized discourse types and schematic constraints...' (1983:238).

In fact, it might be the lack of an adequate 'poetic schema' that keeps many language teachers from approaching the medium more freely. However, poetry as song (according to Snyder's definition) is universal and an integral part of story telling, and the entire oral tradition of literature. This is a pan-cultural fact, and perhaps a very good place to begin an introduction to poetry.

Conclusion

The use of poetry at all levels of language learning requires the careful grading and selection of poems both in terms of difficulty and accessibility (see Rivers & Temperly, 1978; McKay, 1982; Christison, 1982). It is suggested here that the 'ordinary language' of much contemporary poetry be considered in that selection. Other researchers have demonstrated a variety of activities that connect poetry and language and the communicative classroom (see Preston, 1982; Candlin & Short, 1984).

By looking at a single piece of literary discourse, we hope to see how the meaning of a poem must be sought at various levels. The significance of individual components depends upon the ability to perceive their communicative value, and this value is something that can only be acquired in context, by looking at a poem in this case in the entirety of its associative meanings. As such, it can be instructive to learners as well, and it has the added advantage of (usually) being short, authentic, and complete. Such a stylistic analysis indicates that ESL-EFL learners can have even greater access to understanding discourse in general, and literature in particular, by observing closely how meaning arises according to use.

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