The Routledge Handbook of Language and Creativity

Rodney H. Jones

Literary narrative

Publication details
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315694566.ch15

Andrea Macrae
Published online on: 08 Sep 2015

How to cite: Andrea Macrae. 08 Sep 2015, Literary narrative from: The Routledge Handbook of Language and Creativity Routledge
Accessed on: 31 Oct 2023
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315694566.ch15

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
15

Literary narrative

Andrea Macrae

Introduction

Literary narrative has (debatably) four essential elements: characters; plot; narration; and fictional worlds. The very nature of a literary narrative is creative, and these four constituents of its rich texture are made and moulded through creative uses of language. The construction of major and minor characters, character interaction, and other aspects of characterisation; the invention, portrayal, and sequencing of events; the mode and style of narration, and the role and voice of the narrator; the depiction of vibrant fictional worlds, from the realistic to the fantastic: each of these elements entails, invites, affords, and encourages different kinds of linguistic creativity.

This chapter provides an overview of the role of linguistic creativity in literary narrative. It explores the ways in which its elements, and the nature of literary narrative more generally, foster and facilitate linguistic creativity. The chapter begins with a brief definition of ‘literary narrative’ in relation to the concept of ‘narrative’, its different genres and forms, and literariness. The chapter then outlines founding approaches to the study of linguistic creativity in literary narrative, chiefly etymological, sociohistorical, and biographical approaches, influenced by modernist neoliberal concerns with the self and knowledge. Next, the chapter looks in detail at contemporary topics and issues in literary narrative and linguistic creativity, evolving from these roots, but reflecting modernist and postmodernist ideas about social, psychological, cultural, and sociolinguistic constructions of perspective and identity. This section of the chapter explores, in particular, the topics and issues of authorial style, mind style, character voice, other worlds, and cultural contexts. The next major section of the chapter then briefly illustrates dominant current theories and approaches serving to investigate these topics and issues: stylistic concepts of foregrounding and defamiliarisation; historical stylistics; relevance theory; schema theory; and cognitive poetic approaches more broadly. Examples of leading work in these areas are discussed, as models of current practice. Lastly, the chapter looks forward to future directions for research.

Narrative can be defined from a text-based, classical perspective, by its common characteristics – that is, its most basic ingredient: two or more events connected by a cause-and-effect relationship, usually involving a change of state. Post-classical approaches to narrative pay more attention to sociological, cultural, historical, and psychological contexts of narrative’s production and reception – that is, recognising narrative as a discourse construct with a social function. Developing alongside post-classical approaches, cognitive narratology defines narrative from an experiential perspective,
in terms of the cognitive ways in which (and anthropological reasons for which) readers perceive and make sense of something (for example, a text) as narrative (Herman et al., 2005). In the latter view, ‘narrativisation’ is something that takes place in the reading experience, whereby the reader uses frames, scripts, schemas, and other cognitive processes to build conceptual representations of story worlds and, within those conceptual representations, create relationships between story world objects, characters, and events. To scholars who hold this view, a fifth essential element of narrative would be the reader’s perception or active, dynamic construction of a narrative as narrative. The different contributions to understanding of linguistic creativity in literary narrative outlined in this chapter can be located at a wide variety of points across this spectrum of theoretical stances towards narrative.

Western narrativity infuses a variety of literary genres, with its beginnings in ancient Greek and Sanskrit myths, in the heroic and poetic epic, and in the oral folktale. Scholes, Phelan, and Kellogg (2006: 11–15) tentatively trace the evolution of Western literary narrative, through genre and focus, to the birth of the novel, as illustrated in Figure 15.1.

It is perhaps easy to see how a culture in which the oral epic poem is ingrained can become rich in everything from lyric ballads, elegies, and processional plays to dramatic

---

**Sacred, quasi-historical, or fictional myth, legend, or folktale**

(Allegiance to re-creative telling of traditional story)

*Example: Oral epic poetry*

---

**Empirical**

(Allegiance to reality)

**Fictional**

(Allegiance to the ideal)

---

**Historical**

(Focus on truth of fact, past)

*Example: Biography*

---

**Mimetic**

(Focus on truth of sensation and environment, present)

*Example: Autobiography*

---

**Romantic**

(Focus on rhetoric, beauty – aesthetics)

*Example: Romance*

---

**Didactic**

(Focus on intellectual and moral instruction)

*Example: Fable*

---

(variously synthesised in)

*The early novel*

---

_Figure 15.1_ The evolution of Western literary narrative
histories and novellas. Scholes, Phelan, and Kellogg (2006: 15–16) are keen to emphasise the different kinds of interdependence, intertwining, and synthesis of conventions of form and focus throughout the history of literary narrative – bridging poetry and prose, bridging folktale and drama – and highlight modern disintegrations of formal syntheses too. The evolution of literary narrative, even if the scope of attention is limited to the West, is not linear and progressive. Scholes, Phelan, and Kellogg (2006: 16) see the markers of this amorphous amalgam in the contemporary novel in particular, arguing that:

[I]n its instability the novel partakes of the general nature of narrative. Poised between the direct speaker or singer of lyric and the direct presentation of action in drama; between allegiance to reality and to the ideal; it is capable of greater extremes than other forms of literary art.

The novel is the form of literary narrative on which this chapter focuses.

This chapter adopts a perspective on literature and literary language that locates literariness on a cline. Different forms (poetry, drama, and prose) have different linguistic creative affordances (consider ‘poetic syntax’ in poetry, for example, whereby nouns can more regularly be post-modified with adjectives, for the purposes of metrical and sound patterning and/or semantic foregrounding, and double syntax across enjambment can be exploited). These linguistic creative affordances are a significant factor in the perception of texts as more or less literary. Literary narrative is more literary than more prosaic kinds of narrative on two counts: its tendency to self-consciously construct fictional worlds, rather than to present a history of the real; and its tendency to use language to create meaning in more artful and poetic ways. These artful and poetic uses of language – these creative linguistic strategies – cross-cut the linguistic levels: literary narrative exploits the full range of semiotic play, from manipulation of morphology and syntax to represent regional dialects (or, more radically, to present invented languages), to the inversion of pragmatic norms within character dialogue to convey character dynamics. The contemporary critical issues and topics addressed in this chapter – authorial style, mind style, character voice, other worlds, and cultural influences – each involve creativity across multiple linguistic levels, as will be illustrated with a range of examples from modern novels.

First, however, a brief survey of historical perspectives on literary narrative and linguistic creativity is warranted.

**Historical perspectives**

Three areas of interest have dominated the study of language and creativity in literary narrative up until the late twentieth century: etymologically and anthropologically oriented work on lexical coinings and neologisms; biographical and sociohistorical attention to language as a marker of the world view of the author and his or her society; and study of language for the purposes of attribution of authorship.

Etymologists and sociolinguists have found literature to be a useful source of data through which to trace developments in language use (for example, changes in the lexicon, changes in literacy), and in interactions between languages and dialects across countries and regions. Old and Medieval English literature (such as *Beowulf* and Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*), for example, are invaluable historical texts full of revelations about the nature and development of the national tongue. The scarcity of manuscripts of
literary works of these eras makes it difficult to gauge the relative creativity of the language in terms of its inventiveness and how far the language is drawn from (or was subsequently absorbed into) everyday discourse. However, it is believed that many of the kennings (metaphorical descriptions created by the joining of two words) in *Beowulf* were original to that tale. *The Canterbury Tales* is revelatory in different ways, manifesting Chaucer’s determined use (and co-construction) of an English vernacular, infused as it was with the influence of French (brought in with the Norman invasion) and Latin borrowings.

Some of these studies have also been used to suggest links between new word formation and ideological, philosophical, scientific, and technological developments: changes in ideas and new creations driving a need for new words through which to express those ideas and objects. While new terminology is not always attributed to literary authors, literary texts have been used as records of the point at which new words entered the cultural lexicon. Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1818), written c. 1798–9 and revised in 1817–18, famously mentions ‘base ball’ in its early pages, and is used thus to debunk the popular hypothesis that the game was not invented until the 1840s, in the United States. Occasionally, and within new historicism particularly, the creative expressions of popular authors have been regarded as a means of measuring popular sentiment. For example, the detail of the various metaphorical constructions through which Dickens establishes the overarching metaphorical conceit in *Bleak House* (1852–3) – that of the legal system (and other forms of institutional subjugation) as a ubiquitous, oppressive, far-reaching fog – have been interrogated as a reflection of contemporary social views and concerns.

More often, the language of a novel has been regarded as a possible lens upon the priorities and world view of the author, specifically. Leech and Short (2007: 151), for example, state that ‘it is commonplace that a writer’s style reveals that particular writer’s habitual way of experiencing and interpreting things’. Similarly, although stylometry does not assert that style reflects ideology, it otherwise works on the same principle: that language use is author-specific. Stylometry is the statistical analysis of language use for the purposes of authorship attribution. Features such as word length frequency distributions, use of rare words, and communities of vocabulary (that is, groups of words that occur together in different works) have been common bases for arguments over authorship. Although stylometry has a long history (see Mascol, 1888a, 1888b; Mendenhall, 1887, 1901), authorial style remains of great interest within narratology (compare Morton, 1978), and is the first of several current critical issues and topics to which this chapter will now turn.

### Critical issues and topics

This part of the chapter will move through three interrelated intersections of linguistic creativity and literary narrative at the forefront of critical attention: fictional voices (including authorial style, mind style, and character voice); fictional worlds; and the role of cultural contexts.

Authorial ‘style’ refers to an author’s distinctive manner of expression. This includes an author’s linguistic tendencies in terms of figurative constructions, descriptive choices, register, syntax, collocations, lexicon, etc. Authorial style (as opposed to plot, for example) is a common reason that readers give for favouring one author over another within a genre, although preference for a particular author’s style is very much a matter of subconscious aesthetic motivations (Miall & Kuiken, 1994; Stockwell, 2009). As mentioned above, the concept of authorial style is used for authorship attribution and is often closely related to
Andrea Macrae

authorial identity. Some authors, however, are more ‘distinct’ in their style than others: certain authors are known for their idiosyncratic expression. For example, Ernest Hemingway is often noted for his ‘bare’ style (Lodge, 1993), using simple sentences, with paratactic and polysyndetic structures lacking in evaluative adjectives, and other value-laden expressions, with simple, predominantly monosyllabic lexis. This is illustrated in the following extract from *The Old Man and the Sea* (1976 [1952]: 47, cited in Simpson, 2014: 140):

He knelt down and found the tuna under the stern with the gaff and drew it toward him keeping it clear of the coiled lines. Holding the line with his left shoulder again, and bracing on his left hand and arm, he took the tuna off the gaff hook and put the gaff back in place. He put one knee on the fish and cut strips of dark red meat longitudinally from the back of the head to the tail. They were wedge-shaped strips and he cut them from next to the back bone down to the edge of the belly.

George Eliot, on the other hand, is renowned for her lengthy, hypotactic sentences, using multiple clauses, each laden with descriptive detail in fairly formal lexis, as in the following paragraph from *Adam Bede* (2008 [1859]: 85):

Mrs Poyser curtsied duly, and watched the two horses until they had disappeared from the yard, amidst great excitement on the part of the pigs and the poultry, and under the furious indignation of the bull-dog, who performed a Pyrrhic dance, that every moment seemed to threaten the breaking of his chain. Mrs Poyser delighted in this noisy exit; it was a fresh assurance to her that the farm-yard was well guarded, and that no loiterers could enter unobserved; and it was not until the gate had closed behind the Captain that she turned into the kitchen again, where Dinah stood with her bonnet in her hand, waiting to speak to her aunt, before she set out for Lisbeth Bede’s cottage.

Of course, authors do not write in a vacuum and some identify with, or are retrospectively identified with, particular literary movements that employ specific linguistic codes. Several literary movements can be distinguished and defined by their new, creative uses of language. Modernism, for example, is famous for the style known as ‘stream of consciousness’, illustrated in the following extract from Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (2000 [1925]: 3):

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her when, with a squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, ‘Musing among the vegetables?’ – was that it?

Stream of consciousness writing tends to mimic – in its syntax, use of dashes, and topic shifting – the natural flow of thought. Although descriptive detail is often sensitive, attention is often fleeting: the object, moment, person, etc., in focus within the given point of view is only in focus transiently, the emphasis being much more on the perceiver’s thoughts than the thing perceived. Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927)
are prototypical examples of this prose style. This creative use of language is linked to contemporary ideological concerns with the relationship between the subjective self and the world, and the representation of the psychological realities of the self. George Eliot’s style, while sufficiently distinct to allow her prose to be identifiably hers, corresponds with the broader stylistic conventions of nineteenth-century realist fiction, marked as it is by its complexity of sentences structures and densely evaluative language. As with modernism, the stylistic conventions of the movement can be linked to the concerns of the movement as a whole, being motivated to authentically and convincingly depict and comment on social structures and relations, with an emphasis on detailed and complex portrayals of character and context rather than plot. Here, we can recognise Cook’s (2000) perception of linguistic creativity as ‘a force for conformity and solidarity, creating and reinforcing’ group relationships and boundaries, as much as a tool for resisting and rebelling, and breaking new ground (Carter, 2011: 338).

The notion of distinct authorial style can be thus be challenged through contextualisation within contemporary literary movements and conventions, and related aesthetic and ideological priorities. Diachronic comparison of an author’s work can also often reveal development and maturation in narrative style, and writing in different genres can lead authors in new creative directions, further problematising stylistic stereotyping. George Eliot’s third novel *Silas Marner: The Weaver of Raveloe* (1861), for example, is much shorter than her more famous works, and is much simpler in overall narrative structure (with fewer secondary characters and subplots) and in style (with simpler lexis and sentence structuring, and less descriptive detail). Some authors also write in different styles and genres under different names and pseudonyms (compare, for example, Iain Banks with Iain M. Banks, and J. K. Rowling with Robert Galbraith). A further interesting case in point is the Mills and Boon industry: roughly 1,000 authors contribute to its range of genres, but each series, within each genre (‘classic romance’, ‘contemporary romance’, and so on), has guidelines and conventions for its required style sufficient to render its contributing authors’ voices indistinct. All of these examples suggest that authorial style, written to stand out or blend in, to forge new experimental ground or to develop a conventional code, is perhaps partially a matter of subconscious channelling of habits of expression shaped by world view, but much more a matter of controlled construction and artful technique.

If it can be argued, with the mentioned caveats in mind, that an author’s style is identifiable through its occurrence across the author’s entire oeuvre, ‘mind style’ is the manner of expression specific to a work and reflecting the world view of a character or narrating persona. The term was coined by Fowler (1977: 76), who wrote that ‘cumulatively, consistent structural options, agreeing in cutting the presented world to one pattern or another, give rise to an impression of a world-view, what I shall call a “mind-style”’. It is possible to distinguish narrator and character ‘mind styles’ from broader authorial style, and comparison of the mind styles apparent within an author’s oeuvre can, in fact, aid in identifying authorial style – the authorial stylistic consistencies thrown into relief by the narratorial idiosyncrasies. Without a range of different narrators across an author’s collected works, it is harder to draw a clear distinction between the voices of narrators and the voice and style of the author.

Both relatively conventional and highly abnormal mind styles are created through ‘cumulative tendencies of stylistic choice’ (Leech & Short, 2007: 151). Eccentric and unorthodox mind styles are created through a density of various kinds of defamiliarisation: the point of view through which the fictional world is portrayed is constructed as markedly deviant. The narrating protagonist of Samuel Beckett’s novella *Molloy* (1951) depicts his world by means of highly modalised constructions, expressing uncertainty about much of what
happens, shifting between tenses, and often using free direct speech (without demarcating the words spoken by others, or by himself, from his narration). Although the narration is ‘reliable’ in the sense that it is honest, the effect is highly confusing and disorienting for the reader. The expression of the narrator protagonist of Eimear McBride’s *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* (2013) is much harder to follow, likewise employing free direct speech, but also using broken syntax and incomplete, often very short, sentences. The book opens with:

> For you. You’ll soon. You’ll give her name. In the stitches of her skin she’ll wear your say. Mammy me? Yes you. Bounce the bed, I’d say. I’d say that’s what you did. Then lay you down. They cut you round. Wait and hour and day.

(*McBride, 2013: 7*)

The pained, rushed, and confused thoughts of the protagonist are portrayed in the stilted, frustrated, half-silenced, and stumbling style of narration. As the book jacket’s blurb proclaims:

> [I]t is not so much a stream of consciousness as an unconscious railing against a life that makes little sense, forming a shocking and intimate insight into the thoughts, feelings and chaotic sexuality of a young and isolated protagonist. To read [this book] is to plunge inside its narrator’s head, experiencing her world first-hand.

Irregular mind styles have become increasingly popular in the last two decades: *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (Haddon, 2003), *The Selected Works of T. S. Spivet* (Larsen, 2009), and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (Foer, 2005) are just a few examples of works of fiction written in the first person through mind styles reflecting symptoms of autism or forms of obsessive compulsive disorder. Although more conventional mind styles likewise involve skilled creativity on the part of the author, different kinds of creativity, perhaps, are involved when constructing highly defamiliarising mind styles. This trend, the kinds of linguistic expression that are employed to portray unusual mind styles, and the rationale behind those linguistic choices are interesting issues in current narratology.

In some modes and styles of narration, it can be difficult to make a further distinction between the mind style of the narrating persona and the characters through which the narrator focalises. In some of Virginia Woolf’s writing – *To the Lighthouse* (1927), for example – it could be argued that the mind styles of the various characters through which the narration focalises are not sufficiently different from each other – or that those differences are smoothed over by the stream of consciousness style – rendering the narratorial and character viewpoints and voices difficult to tell apart. The stream of consciousness style is also used in the modernist novels *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) by James Joyce and *Life and Death of Harriet Frean* (1922) by May Sinclair. In these novels, Joyce and Sinclair focalise the omniscient, heterodiegetic narration through the minds of the protagonists, and use this narratorial mode, combined with stream of consciousness, to portray the development of the protagonists’ consciousness, and intellectual and verbal abilities. Unlike McBride’s novel, in which the expression is fairly consistent throughout, these novels present the trajectory of the *bildungsroman* – from youth to adulthood – through language, as well as plot: at the novels’ beginnings, the prose replicates early childhood babbling and sound play; gradually, the lexis and syntax progresses to portray more adult awareness and expression. In these contexts, the mind style in question is more directly attributable to a specific character viewpoint and voice, and is distinct from the focalising narration.
Constructing convincing characters that are distinguishable from each other, via the voice of the narrator, all of these fictional figures filtered through authorial style, requires a high degree of creative skill and subtle variation in linguistic techniques. The construction of spoken character discourse also opens up a further element of linguistic creativity, in the option of manipulating standard syntax and orthography to present more realistic verbal discourse. Part of the nineteenth-century realist endeavour was to portray the voices of the underrepresented working class with verisimilitude. Authors such as Charles Dickens and George Eliot use colloquial lexis and grammatically deviant syntax to mimic the accents and dialects of the working classes, in addition to what is conventionally referred to as ‘phonetic spelling’: consonant clusters are elided, and spelling is altered to replicate ‘non-standard’ pronunciation. The speech of the character Joseph, in Wuthering Heights (1995 [1847]: 308), is portrayed by Emily Brontë in language such as:

Aw’d rather, by th’haulf, hev’em swearing i’ my lugs frough morn tuh neeght, nur hearken yah, hahsiver! [ . . . ] It’s a blaming shaime, us Aw cannot oppen t’Blessed Book, bud yah set up them glories tuh sattan, un’ all t’ flaysome wickednesses ut iver wer born intuh t’ warld!

Novelists can exploit and experiment with the relationship between mind style and expression in interesting ways, especially in cases in which a first person narrator’s manner of expression sits ambiguously somewhere between spoken and written styles of narration. Simpson (2014: 115) discusses the stylistic shifts that Irvine Welsh creates in the accent and dialect of the narrating protagonist Mark Renton in his novel Trainspotting (1993). Much of Renton’s narration is expressed through phonetic spelling and non-standard syntax imitating an Edinburgh vernacular, but when the context requires it (in a law court, for example) Renton’s expression shifts, and his voice is presented with standard orthography and spelling, and with use of a formal register and highly articulate lexis. This demonstrates the performative nature of his accent and dialect, while also highlighting a complication in the concept of mind style. Renton’s narrating voice, one would assume, reveals his natural, habitual, subconscious style of expression – that of a working class, uneducated man – and yet his speech occasionally employs a very different style of expression. This problematises the drawing of a simplistic relationship between mind style, world view, and linguistic expression, just as the relationship between authorial style and linguistic expression can be problematised.

We now turn from fictional mind styles – perceptions of the world of the novel – to the fictional worlds themselves, and the ways in which linguistic creativity is involved in the building of rich and immersive story settings. The affordances of narrative fiction are greater, in this regard, than those of other kinds of literature, not least because of the scope available in long prose forms for the drawing of complex and detailed worlds. The aforementioned nineteenth-century realist texts of George Eliot and her contemporaries illustrate this well, with their fine-grained, vividly drawn, verisimilar depictions of domestic settings. All fictional worlds (as with fictional mind styles) involve both creativity at the level of ideas and premises, and creativity as manifest at the level of language. Although the latter is the focus of attention of this chapter, it bears a close relationship to the former, as demonstrated by the discussion of mind styles. Within the construction of fictional worlds that are very different from our reality – fantastic, dystopian, anti-realistic and non-realistic worlds – whereby different societal structures, laws of physics, genders, life forms, etc., are created, new names and noun phrases are most prototypically required, but sometimes also new verbs
and unusual descriptive collocations, for example. Rarely, but occasionally, authors create innovative, non-standard grammatical systems through which to express the communication of their characters – see, for example, Russell Hoban’s *Riddley Walker* (1980) – or even invented (constructed) languages (see Ball, Chapter 8). In this, much like the use of phonetic spelling, a careful balance needs to be struck between innovative presentation, convincing realism (or, indeed, anti-realism), and decipherability. Invented languages, and narrative fictions more broadly, in their ontological departure from reality, consciously create and express new visions of the world.

The evolution of narrative has been linked to a cotemporaneous assertion and questioning of culturally dominant visions, truths, and ‘knowledge’ (such as religious ideas, understanding of the shape of the earth, etc.) (Ryan, 2005: 344). Structural forms, thematic concerns, and linguistic creativity in literary narrative are shaped by, and in turn impact upon and contribute to, cultural contexts. Western postmodernism, for example, has picked up and continued modernism’s confrontation of the disintegration of trust in single, holistic meanings, in cohesive truths, to the extent that the very possibility of representing a narrative or truth is challenged and confronted. Brigid Brophy’s *In Transit* (1969) intertwines a multitude of postmodernist threads. It is written in a multimodal style, shifting between genres including erotica, opera, detective fiction, and surrealist fiction, riddled with intertextual references, employing various languages through which to explore how these languages are ingrained with gender, and with a form of address and consciousness of an ‘other’ in the construction of the ‘I’, the self. The post-colonial context is also one in which language choices come to the fore, offering a new dimension to linguistic creativity. English is the language of colonisation, as well as of globalisation. Zoe Wicomb’s post-apartheid novel *David’s Story* (2001) is predominantly written in English, but is permeated with words from various languages used in South Africa (defined in a glossary), challenging simplistic notions of hybrid languages. This occurs at the same time as a destabilisation of reference all together, involving the literal decomposition of the word ‘truth’ (Wicomb, 2001: 136) within the narrative’s overarching theme of the impossibility of authenticity, narrativisation, and representation. Here, the specific cultural context – the idiosyncratic sociopolitical, linguistic, and literary nuances of this moment within South Africa, as perceived by Wicomb – infuse the fiction with particular kinds of polyglot and referential linguistic creativity. As Carter (2011: 337) asserts, all creativity is a contextual act.

Finally, the kinds of literary structures and forms culturally available, dominant, and channelled also influence linguistic creativity. Modern, post-Renaissance, Western narrative is predominantly focused on the self, the individual overcoming adversity (the hero’s journey, the *bildungsroman*), with a sole narrator and protagonist, and on knowledge and truths. Figure 15.1 above maps out the evolution of Western literary narrative, but within non-Western literary narrative there is a diverse range of story-forming and story-telling traditions and developments, including oral, performed, and collaborative story-telling, non-linear narration, short forms, a prominence of analogy and magic realism, mythical sagas, and lengthy narratives of whole families or communities, rather than sole heroes or anti-heroes, etc. Different ideological, philosophical, and sociopolitical concerns also determine the evolution of non-Western narratives in different ways. The South African fiction of Wicomb and others is variably influenced by the different story-telling traditions and literary heritage of the country’s many racial communities. *David’s Story* (Wicomb, 2001) includes a sub-narrative engaging with the journey narratives, legends, and histories of the repressed Griqua race, for example. In the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century globalised
Literary narrative

world, cross-fertilisation of forms, ancient and modern, ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’, is rife, and tactical intertextuality abounds. This further undermines conception of authorial style as subconscious and habitual, determined by the world view and cultural context of the author, rather recognising style as a ‘motivated choice’ (Studer, 2008) and ‘stylisation’ as a knowing performance of style to conform to or deviate from cultural norms (Coupland, 2007).

Today’s technological advances also drive and direct creativity in literary narrative. The development of printing and progressive economic efficiencies in publishing brought about the serialised literary narrative, and then the novel. This facilitated particular kinds of world-building, character development, themes, and styles motivated by the concerns of the widening and changing audience. Similarly, digitisation is shaping contemporary creative writing, bringing with it a democratisation in online publication, offering global access to web-based texts, with new affordances in the forms of hypertexts and e-literature, and contributing to new trends in short and quickly digestible forms (such as Twitter fiction). In the digital context, new freedoms and constraints encourage language to be used in different ways. Words on screens can become both referential and functional, presenting choice in narrative paths as hyperlinks to new lexia (electronic pages). Flash fiction (very short fiction, usually less than 1,000 words), becoming increasingly popular, forgoes character development and detailed setting to capture the mood and tone of a poignant moment, often with a lack of closure and a density of meaning-potential. These new literary forms and uses of language create a changed relationship between the language and the reader, and add new parameters to the act of narrativisation – the readerly reception, construction, and imaginative realisation of literary narrative.

Current contributions and research

This section of the chapter provides an overview of leading research into linguistic creativity in literary narrative, with an emphasis on methods of analysing the relationship between the language of the text and the process of reading and interpreting literary narrative. It takes up the three threads running through the prior section – fictional voices, fictional worlds, and the role of cultural contexts – and discusses several branches of contemporary stylistics that offer valuable approaches to these issues and topics.

The discipline of stylistics offers a wide range of tools for the analysis of language in fictional prose. The basic concepts of defamiliarisation and foregrounding (Leach & Short, 2007) are fundamental to appreciation and analytical understanding of linguistic creativity, in terms of literary linguistic ‘artfulness’, and in terms of inventiveness and originality. Foregrounding is the process of drawing attention to particular features of language. Linguistic deviation, often at the levels of morphology, lexis, grammar, and semantics, is used to disrupt the reader’s inattentive reading, expectations of the familiar, and lack of conscious recognition of distinctiveness, to ‘defamiliarise’ (following Shklovsky, 1917) and make the world strange through artful expression. Leech and Short (2007), Simpson (2014), Verdonk (2002), and Toolan (2001) model very detailed analyses of linguistic defamiliarisation in literary prose. They each explore how authorial style, mind style, and character voice are created, and fictional worlds constructed, partially, but significantly, through foregrounding and deviation. Their wide-ranging analyses illustrate both the intricate level of detail at which linguistic creativity operates, and the originality and idiosyncrasy of much of this linguistic creativity: the stylistic dissimilarity from extract to extract, and the needs to address the linguistic particularities of each text individually, to respond to each extract with a sensitivity to the singular ways with which it manipulates language to create meaning.
(Attridge, 2004). Their analyses draw out the stylistic effects of participant relations within clauses, unusual agency, improbable juxtapositions and incongruent collocations, syntactic weighting, patterns of nominalisation, etc. Leech and Short (2007: 162–7) compare normal and unconventional mind styles. Their analysis of Benjy’s unusual mind style in an extract from Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1931) moves systematically through structure, lexis, syntax, and ‘textual relations’ to demonstrate how Benjy’s use of simple, monosyllabic lexis, few adjectives, paratactic sentence structuring, mistaken intransitive use of commonly transitive verbs, limited verb forms, and excessive use of pronominal forms instead of pronouns all indicate a mind incapable of synthesising and organising information in terms of relationships such as cause and effect, evaluating relative significance, and so on.

There are countless such examples within stylistic scholarship of use of densely detailed analysis of linguistic defamiliarisation and foregrounding to reveal the workings of creative constructions in literature.

**Historical stylistics** (Busse, 2010) uses sub-branches of stylistics to investigate diachronic changes in the style of texts, or synchronic stylistic aspects of historical literary texts. Ingham (1992) combines feminist, sociolinguistic, and new historicist ideas in questioning claims that Dickens’ female characters are stereotypes and/or caricatures of women in his own life. She compares the language that he uses to describe and voice female characters, including semantic fields, metaphors, and negation, with other fictional and non-fictional writing of the period, and argues that some aspects of his language use is fairly distinctive, while other aspects of his depiction of women reflect changing attitudes at the time. Ingham’s combined methodology enables her to reveal Dickens’ portrayal of female figures to be more detailed and problematic than mere stereotypes, and too patterned and bearing too many traces of broader sociocultural influences to be closely analogous to real individual women in his life. Historical stylistics increasingly involves the use of corpus stylistics, and sometimes computational stylistics, bringing contemporary technological advances to stylometry and employing the tools for broader ends than solely authorship attribution. For example, Mahlberg (2013) uses these methods to investigate various aspects of the language of Dickens, such as his use of body language in characterisation.

**Relevance theory** (Clark, 2009, 2013; Sperber & Wilson, 1995) is employed by stylisticians to study ways in which meaning is inferable from texts, making a distinction between what is linguistically encoded and what is pragmatically available for inference. Clark (2009) uses relevance theory to intervene in literary critical debates about the language of Golding’s *The Inheritors* (1955), particularly in relation to the mind style of the character Lok and the divergent overarching interpretations of the text. Specifically, he addresses Halliday’s (1971) lexico-grammatical analysis and interpretative arguments drawn from transitivity patterns, and the challenge presented to these argument by Hoover’s (1999) more detailed corpus analysis of the lexis and agency in the text. Clark (2009) adds to this work by accounting for some of the interpretative effects described by Halliday, Hoover, and others via inferences available from textual details. Clark explores the clause structures and restricted diction of Lok’s mind style in relation to the reader’s expectation of informativity and veracity, and the inferences available therein. He notes the high frequency of unresolved questions within available inferences when reading passages focalised through Lok’s mind style in comparison to the available inferences when reading passages from other narrative points of view in the text. He also discusses implicature in literary contexts: the fiction reader’s interpretative intent to build up a rich conceptualisation of the story world, rather than to derive meaning with the same efficiency-based model of inference as everyday communication. Again, this is just one example
indicative of the advances offered by relevance theory in understanding the interpretative effects of linguistic creativity in literary narrative.

Schema theory (Schank & Abelson, 1977) shares some principles and priorities with relevance theory: both regard the text as a composition of cues evoking reader interpretation, and both focus on the work done by the reader in creating meaning. Schema theory operates on the assumption that efficient processing requires that we store scripts and schemas of experiences, so as to avoid having to comprehend everything anew when we meet previously encountered situations. Texts ‘activate’ readers’ schemas through reference to particular aspects of situations, emotions, objects associated with particular processes, etc., and the readers then use their schema to make sense of the texts’ information. At a basic level, this is how and why authors do not have to articulate all of the details of the fictional world of their story or of character behaviour: readers make a lot of assumptions from even minimal cues based on their schema. Culpeper (2001) explores how readers infer characterisation based on textual activation of schema. Schema are dynamic, reinforced or revised by new experiences. Linguistic creativity in literary narrative can be ‘schema disrupting’ or ‘schema refreshing’ within the fields of language schema, text schema, and world schema (as categorised by Stockwell, 2002: 80), through, for example, invented languages, hybrid genres, and sociopolitically persuasive dystopian visions in fiction, respectively. Cook (1994) finds schema disruption and refreshment to be what lies behind the concepts of defamiliarisation and foregrounding, and the basis of appreciation of literariness. Much of this work aligns with a view of linguistic creativity in literary narrative as not a completed product, but rather the process of interaction between the text and the individual reader in a dynamic cognitive context; the relationship between what is actually inscribed on the page and what scope and direction there is for interpretative realisation of that textual detail; the balance between the actual linguistic articulation and the facilitation of the creative imagination of the reader (Carter, 2011: 340; Stockwell, 2009).

Schema theory sits among a suite of models employed with the cognitive branch of stylistics, sometimes called cognitive poetics (Jeffries & McIntyre, 2010; Semino & Culpeper, 2002; Stockwell, 2002). Semino (2002) illustrates the ways in which Alekos, a character in Captain Corelli’s Mandolin (de Bernières, 1999), relates to the world using a naive (and, necessarily, unusually flexible) angel schema. Semino goes on, in the same chapter, to demonstrate the comparable value of conceptual metaphor theory, another approach among this suite, to the analysis of mind style. Semino employs conceptual metaphor theory to analyse the dominant metaphorical constructions, and the inferable psychology behind them, of Clegg, the protagonist of John Fowles’ The Collector (1963). Clegg, Semino demonstrates, views his victim, Miranda, through the source domain of butterfly. This conceptual structure is so firmly embedded in his mind style that it enables him to act towards her as if she were a butterfly, recording his observations of her and capturing her. Following her capture, the clashes between her behaviour and what he can and wants to do with her, and the source domain of butterfly, frustrate him, and he in turn uses further butterfly metaphors to express this, and tries to rationalise her behaviour with different extensions of the metaphorical structure. Semino augments the analytical affordances of conceptual metaphor theory in this instance with insights from its progeny, blending theory (Fauconnier, 1997). Other work on readerly conceptualisation of narratorial and character voices includes Stockwell’s (2009) notions of ‘mind-modelling’ and identification, which draw from, and add further cognitive stylistic insights to, post-classical narratological appropriations of theory of mind (Palmer, 2004; Richardson, 2006; Zunshine, 2006). This work variably attends to schemas and other cognitive systems and psychological concepts apparent in the ways in which a fictional
narrator or character relates to the fictional world; readers’ schema and other cognitive systems and psychological concepts appealed to in the authorial rendering of those characters and fictional worlds; and the relationships between them. Other approaches within cognitive stylistics – such as prototype theory (Rosch, 1975), text world theory (Gavins, 2007; Werth, 1999), and deictic shift theory (Duchan, Bruder, & Hewitt 1995), several leaning significantly on Langacker’s (2008) cognitive grammar – offer insights on different aspects of interpretation of linguistic creativity in literary narrative, such as the process of fictional world-building, and readerly conceptual immersion and orientation within fictional worlds.

Recommendations for practice

The previous section presents a sample of leading research, modelling a range of approaches available for analysis of linguistic creativity in literary narrative in all of its genres and forms, all drawn from sub-disciplines of stylistics. More mainstream narratological and literary critical approaches can offer different emphases and insights, but stylistic approaches can often serve the same ends with richer gains and a keener grounding in the nuances of the text.

The approaches to linguistic creativity in literary narrative offered by stylistics and its cognitive branches, including and beyond those surveyed in the previous section, facilitate systematic, rigorous analysis with very close attention to linguistic detail. Understanding of the workings of linguistic creativity in literary narrative is not accessible without this acute attention to the minutiae of linguistic features. Few other literary critical disciplines focus on language to this degree, or with advanced linguistic and cognitive theory behind their methods. Good stylistic practice does not lose the thematic and contextual particularities of a literary text behind this linguistic rigour; rather, the systematic study of language is used to explain the interpretative effects of the creative singularity of the text.

Cognitive stylistics, particularly, also recognises the creativity involved in the act of reading, in the heteronomous quality of the reader’s interpretative engagement with a work’s textuality (Stockwell, 2009: 15). A fuller understanding of linguistic creativity in literary narrative requires appreciation of creativity as process not product, and as not individual, but collaborative and culturally contextualised. Cognitive stylistics is increasingly accommodating and incorporating this view into its methods.

Future directions

Two areas within linguistic creativity and literary narrative have been oddly neglected within literary scholarship, but are gaining ground within cognitive poetics. The first is aesthetics, and the role of ‘matters of feeling, taste, preference’ and evaluative aesthetic judgement in readerly responses to literary narrative (Stockwell, 2009: 10). Explanations of why a reader likes a particular author’s style, or a particular novel, are significantly informed by these issues. Stockwell (2009) is gaining ground in this area. Linked to this is the neglect of real readers and their responses to literary narrative, in favour of the highly informed, attentive, and often critically biased readings shared and discussed within academia. New research methods and analytical approaches are being forged in this area too (see Gavins, 2013; Stockwell, 2009), with the promise of hugely valuable insights for disciplines that share the priorities of cognitive poetics.

The close study of linguistic creativity in literary narrative can also shed light on the construction of genre and on the use of linguistic creativity to conform, as well as to deviate. Gavins (2013) presents concentrated work on the literary genre of absurdist fiction, exploring
its common creative linguistic characteristics and readerly responses to those characteristics. Her work partially follows Steen’s (2011: 32–3) framework for understanding genre, which is based on prototype theory and a model of radial structures for conceptual categories. There is a lot of scope for more genre-based work of this kind. Stockwell (2009) and others note the historic propensity of scholarship to focus on unusual fictional minds and worlds. This is perhaps understandable during a period of testing and developing new models, and of excitement about the insights made available by those new models. It is also further fuelled by current trends towards dystopian fiction and in deviant mind styles, as noted above. As Stockwell (2009) argues, however, the linguistic creativity involved in the construction of the conservative and the conventional – conforming kinds of creativity – and the subtle kinds of foregrounding and deviation at work in such texts is equally, if not more, worthy of analytical attention.

Gavins’ (2013) method of research could also offer new insights into the linguistic characteristics of, and common interpretative responses to, particular forms of literary narrative. Research into short stories, and the ways in which meaning is constructed within them, remains sparse, lagging behind research into other newly popular forms such as digital and multimodal literary narrative. As much shorter forms proliferate (flash fiction, Twitter fiction, etc.), more literary critical consideration of the parameters of linguistic meaning making within different narratological constraints may evolve.

More important, though, and more culturally overdue and urgent, is the need to respond not only to new trends in literary form, but also to the nuances of linguistic creativity in literary narrative across the globe. Ironically, perhaps, the cross-fertilisation of genres and styles between different cultural contexts in the internationalised market for readers is drawing new attention to neglected non-Western kinds of linguistic creativity in literary narrative, both contemporary and historic, to the different ideological and sociopolitical movements that have shaped literary cultural heritage in different contexts, and to non-Western scholarly approaches to topics within these areas, including, for example, different conceptions of creativity. A more culturally diverse spectrum of research would radically enhance scholarly understanding in this field.

Related topics
cognitive stylistics; constructed languages; creativity and discourse analysis; lexical creativity; literary stylistics and creativity

Further reading


This book offers a thorough and systematic grounding in the stylistics of literary narrative, explaining and exemplifying detailed analysis of issues such as authorial style, mind style, characterisation, and fictional world-building, and drawing acute interpretative insights from rigorous linguistic investigation of a wealth of extracts of fiction.


In this theoretically dense and ground-breaking work, Stockwell provides a deep exploration of aesthetic aspects of reading such as resonance, intensity, sensation, and empathy, drawing on insights
from cognitive poetics. For more introductory outlines and literary analyses using some of the cognitive poetic models and approaches informing Stockwell’s ideas here, see Jeffries and McIntyre (2010), Semino and Culpeper (2002), and Stockwell (2002).


This is a collection of essays by leading stylisticians, each modelling a detailed stylistic analysis of an extract of literary narrative. The volume provides a valuable overview of stylistic methodologies, an illustration of the interpretative analytical insights made available by those methods, and a demonstration of good practice.

References

Literary narrative


